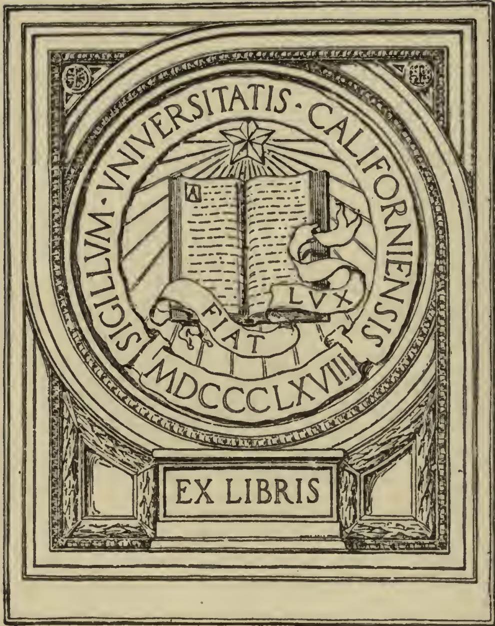
# MALAYAN MONOCHROMES

SIR HUGH CLIFFORD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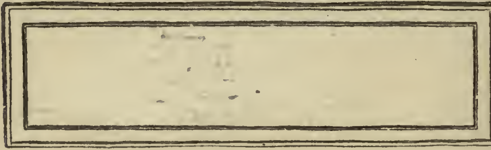

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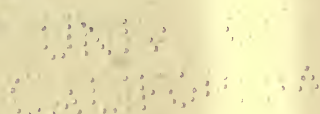
# MALAYAN MONOCHROMES

BY SIR HUGH CLIFFORD, K.C.M.G.

AUTHOR OF "STUDIES IN BROWN HUMANITY" "FURTHER INDIA"
"THE DOWNFALL OF THE GODS" ETC.



NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY
1913

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TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

SIR CECIL CLEMENTI SMITH, G.C.M.G., P.C.

SOMETIME GOVERNOR AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE STRAITS SETTLEMENTS,

A CHIEF UNDER WHOM IT WAS AT ONCE

AN EDUCATION

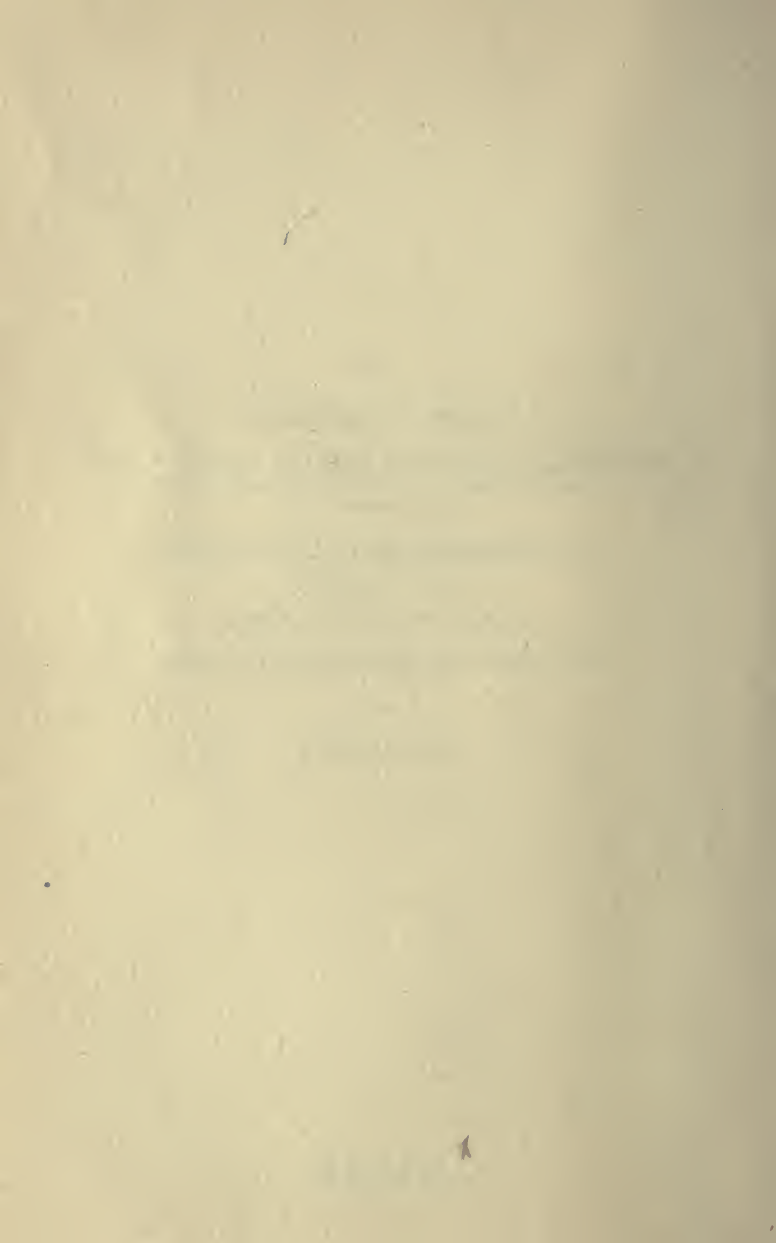
AND A DELIGHT TO SERVE,

THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

BY

THE AUTHOR

271914



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# NOTE

Most of the stories contained in this book have already been published in various Magazines and Periodicals. I must record my thanks to the Proprietors of *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Temple Bar*, *Macmillan's Magazine*, and the *Graphic* for permission to reprint them.

H. C.

# MALAYAN MONOCHROMES

## I

## MAT ARIF THE ELEMENTAL

This is the tale Mat Arif, the outlaw, told to me the night before he died. I sat with him in the condemned cell, for I had brought him comfort in the shape of tobacco and betel-quids, things for which his soul longed; and since, with Oriental philosophy, he bore no ill-will to the men who had doomed him to death, he was good enough to invite me to share these luxuries, and to bear him company for an hour or two. The little bare, boarded room, with the barred window high up in the wall running round two sides of it, was very quiet—so quiet that it gave one a feeling of isolation from the rest of humanity; and the soft tones of the outlaw, as he sat enjoying his smoke and chew with complete calm and obvious content, seemed to emphasise rather than to break upon the stillness. He was a big, sturdy fellow for a Malay, his beautifully built frame denoting both strength and activity. His strong, hard

face was deeply lined; his eyes were bright and full of life, yet there was in them that look of settled, self-contained patience which is so characteristic of the Asiatic in the hour of adversity: they were the eyes of one who was staring inevitable death in the face very steadily, without fear, without curiosity, without even any great measure of reluctance. To me this man had about him something that was mysterious, terrible, haunting; for though his figure was so instinct with force and with vitality, he sat there on the very brink of a gaping grave, and he knew it. Involuntarily my imagination conjured up hideous pictures of that which must befall him ere a dozen hours had sped: I saw him led forth; I saw him blindfolded and pinioned; I saw the executioner's hand grip the lever of the drop; I saw my companion fall through the trap-door, straight as a plummet . . . *ugh!* Strive as I would, I was powerless to keep my mind from dwelling upon that ghastly sight; and ever as Mat Arif spoke to me, the wraith of that awful Thing that was, yet was not, Mat Arif, came between me and his living face.

"It is like the chequer-game," he said, "and behold I am *mat*—check-mated. It hath been a good game and well-contested; and though the end hath come, and I at last am worsted, I have had my share of play—ay, and of plunder too, for I have taken of the white men's pieces more than a pawn or two.

"Yes, *Tuan*, the season for concealment is over and past, and with it the time for lying—though of lies, in very truth, my lawyer-man had a goodly store. He lied dexterously and with cunning; but the judge was a wise man, and he believed no tittle of the vain things that lawyer-man said. As for me, I watched the conflict as one watches two fencers; and it was a pretty sport, but never was I in doubt as to the issue. I had the *grak*, *Tuan*,—a presentiment that mine hour had come,—and I knew that nought, not even the judge himself, had power to save me. Indeed, the trial was without purpose, for Fate no man can stay or alter; yet the affair was conducted in seemly fashion, with state and ancientry, and that pleased me; for it is true, as the proverb hath it, that it were better that our little ones should perish rather than established custom.

"Thou sayest that the trial was of necessity in order that justice might be done? Doubtless, *Tuan*, doubtless: but what is justice, since all things are ordained by Fate? The white folk have much wisdom and might, but they too are only the fingers of Allah; and they act, not according to their own will, but in such fashion as Allah giveth them to act. Justice, sayest thou? Justice—ay, and injustice too, are as Fate maketh them. The white men and the brown are alike Fate's instruments; and Fate, the immutable, in the appointed hour payeth all reckonings, settleth all

scores, maketh square all accounts, be his tools what they may. Men think that 'tis the white men who have ordered my death ; but, *Tuan*, it is not so. I am sentenced by Fate, which no man may elude ; and I have no quarrel against thee and thine, who do only his awful bidding.

" Nor would I that Fate had ordained matters otherwise : for though death be terrible, it is but the price we pay for life ; and I, now that the passing-hour hath well-nigh sounded, would not shirk payment for that which hath been mine ; nor, to escape that payment, would I forego that which I have enjoyed, whereof the memory still lingereth with me.

" It was in the village of Kota Tempan that first I saw Her, *Tuan*,—Alang, the girl whom Fate allotted to me even from the beginning. I had come down over the border to collect a debt that was due to my father, and the folk with whom I stayed were bidden to a wedding-feast. There was a great assembly from all the country round, and I did manfully in the fencing-ring, so that many women cast kind glances my way. I stepped among the throng swinging my shoulders a little, a *kris* at my belt, a spear in my hand ; and the men treated me with honour, for rumour had told them of my prowess ; and I knew that their women-folk would follow me as dogs follow their masters, did I choose to make a sign. It is very good when the heart is young to know that one is a goodlier man than any other whom Allah hath

fashioned, and to be able to cast a conqueror's glance at all the wives and maidens, conscious that they love one, while their men hate and envy. I bore myself arrogantly those days, and men were meek and women bold in my company. But though I showed kindness to many a hussy, my hour had not yet come, and I prized sport and fighting more than all their blandishments.

"But at that wedding-feast, at the hour of the *sanding*, when, as thou knowest, *Tuan*, the bride and bridegroom are led forth, decked splendidly, and are made to sit motionless on the dais before all the company, I looked up and saw Her.

"She was like a flower, very delicate and small, and her hair was black as night, and smoothed with oil so that it shone; and the glamour of her face was like unto that cast by the full-moon, so that its effulgence blinded me. I drew in my breath, and my liver within me was fiery hot of a sudden, so that it gave me pain; and the nails of my hands bit into the flesh as I clinched them, for my whole soul writhed at the thought that she was being given as his bride to the oaf who squatted shame-faced beside her. But of all this I gave no sign, only I laughed aloud, making a jest of much saltness and arrogance, so that the girl on the dais was startled, and for a little space—the mere flicker of an eyelid—her gaze was fixed upon me. It seemed to me that a great fear

possessed her, that she shrank away afraid; and I saw her bosom heave under the weight of gold ornaments that bedecked it. Then I was well pleased, for I knew that she had seen me; and in those days, so surely as a maiden looked upon me, love was born for me in her heart.

"Later, when I had collected my debt, and something over to repay me for my trouble, I tarried in her village, and I was at pains to win the affection of the man to whom Alang had been wedded. In my heart I hated him because he possessed her whom I desired—the girl whom Fate had set apart for me; but this I hid with cunning, which was easy, for the man was a fool. Presently I had won his love, and he was wont to say that we were close as the finger-nail and the quick, which saying tickled me. Later, when all his trust was mine, I bade him accompany me over the border to mine own country, bringing his wife with him; and he—for the silly one had great confidence in me—agreed willingly, since I promised him much happiness when mine own village should be reached.

"One day, therefore, we set off upon our journey, travelling through the forest by a narrow jungle-path: the man Kulop, Alang his wife, myself, and a Sakai dog—an aboriginal jungle-man who bore my gear on his back. All that day we journeyed, and my heart was very glad because I saw now with certainty that Fate had given Alang to me. In the afternoon,

at about the hour when the kine come down to water, we reached a place in the heart of the forest where a little brook ran past a sand-spit, and here we pitched our camp. Kulop and I and the Sakai, Pa' Pa-Tin, cut palm-fronds in the jungle and made three huts, one for Alang and her man, one for me, and one, well below the wind, for the Sakai dog; and Kulop, the witless fellow, thanked me for the care which I bestowed upon the making of the hut which, as he thought, was to shelter him and his wife.

"Now it had been in my mind to delay the business of killing the said Kulop until such time as we had crossed the border into my native land, whither the white man's law doth not run; but when one is young one is impatient, and as I beheld Alang, very neat and lovable, making busy with the cooking-pots, the thought came to me that it was by no means fitting that I should suffer her any longer to be the thrall of the fool, her husband. Also, as I ate rice with him, the silly babble of his speech irked me, for he spoke of his love for me and of the great things which we twain should do when mine own village was reached, and of many other matters which bore witness to his lack of understanding. Therefore, very suddenly I rose up, seized my spear, and stabbed him. Also I called aloud to the Sakai animal to aid me; and he, holding me in great awe, lifted up a heavy club and broke Kulop's head, so that his limbs stiffened slowly and he ceased to move about. Then we

laid him in the shelter which he had designed for me, and I made shift to comfort Alang; for she, being a woman, must needs weep and make protest. But soon, very soon, I dried her eyes, and gave her good reason to thank me, in that I had ridded her of a fool, and had given her a good husband in his stead. *Allah! Allah! Allah!* Many a time from that night forth did she lie in the crook of my arm, and tell to me the tale of her love; and I were a niggard and unworthy did I grudge to Fate aught that he might demand in payment for what he then vouchsafed to me.

"In mine own land I took Alang to wife, but I was irked by the evil things which Kulop's relatives said concerning me; and presently I determined to revisit his village, so that his people might learn better manners and more bridled speech at my hands. I took Alang with me, for I desired to show her kith and kin that I had done well by her, and also that I had no cause for shame for that I had slain her man.

"Now, when I arrived at her village, swaggering somewhat to show that I had no fear, at first men and women and little children ran hither and thither distractedly, like chicks that lack a mother-hen; but I bade them be at peace, and spoke them fair, so that they took heart, and did me reverence, apologising for the vain things which, in their folly, they had said concerning me and my actions. But these folk were very wicked, for, unknown to me, they sent runners

to the nearest police-post; and one afternoon, when I was playing the game of kick-the-basket with sundry youths of the village, of a sudden I was surrounded and set upon by certain heavy-handed Sikh constables; and I, being unarmed, could make no suitable resistance. The Sikhs bound my hands, and all the village people, who had been so humble and soft-spoken while I was free, taunted me in a horrid fashion now that I was fettered; but throughout I felt no *grak*,—no presentiment, of evil—and therefore I knew that I should surely escape.

"On the morrow the Sikhs put me and Alang my wife into a boat, and began the journey down the Perak River to Kuala Kangsar, where the white men live; and I sat in the stern with manacles about my wrists. Now those reaches of the river, *Tuan*, as thou knowest, are beset with rapids, and at the first of these our boat was well-nigh swamped because of the little skill with which the steersman guided her. Then I made great protest, saying that, as my hands were bound, I should die of suffocation were the boat to be upset, and I told my warders that the man who held the steer-oar would certainly drown us all. Then the Sikh corporal unlocked my fetters, and bade me steer the boat; for the crew, fearing an accident, all declared that I was very cunning in the management of crafts through rapids—which indeed was true. Allah is very good, and He hath made all Sikh men fools, for they pray to a cow, eschew

tobacco, and grow their hair long like women: also they undid my fetters.

"I made a little secret sign to Alang that she should watch me closely, and when we reached the big fall I took order to overturn the boat; and seizing Alang and a rifle, which belonged to one of the Sikhs, I made shift to win to the shore. On the bank I stood for a moment looking back at the Sikh men struggling in the water, weighed down by their heavy clothes, with their hair afloat like duck-weed, and with such an uproar coming from them that the voices of the rapid were stilled. I was very well pleased, and I jeered them with many pungent words ere I took to the jungle and won free from pursuit. Then, Alang with me, I passed across the border into mine own land, making only a little stay on the journey to burn the village which had done me dishonour; and in mine own country I lived, loved and honoured by all, for many years. Now and again, when the fancy took me, I went a-raiding into Perak, for the people there grew wealthy under the white man's rule, and I had a mind to share in their prosperity; but I injured no one, in so far as his body was concerned, unless he had the folly and the naughtiness to offer resistance to me when I had a mind to possess myself of his gear. Therefore, those years sped merrily, and Alang loved me well and bore me sons, four or five, and a daughter or twain with eyes like her own. I have no quarrel with Fate, *Tuan*, for he hath

treated me lavishly. Alang was mine to me for many seasons,—mine, mine, mine,—and nought can rob me of that memory ; and now that she hath passed away, I too am weary to be gone. How many hours remain before the dawn, *Tuan*?—for at the dawn I go."

And at the dawn he went, meeting his death with the same calm and deliberate indifference with which he had taken the lives of those who had stood between him and his desire—too completely satisfied with himself, and too sublimely conscious of his own rectitude, to entertain the smallest doubt as to his eternal salvation ; and supremely contented to lay any blame that might be due as a burden to be borne by the broad shoulders of Fate the immutable.

## II

## "OUR TRUSTY AND WELL-BELOVED"

> "To me the straiter prison,
> To me the heavier chain,
> To be Diego Valdez,
> High Admiral of Spain!"
>
> *The Song of Diego Valdez.*

SIR PHILIP HANBURY-ERSKINE, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., —whose other titles, in the liberal type of the Royal Commission, which that day had been read before the Legislative Council, had filled up many lines of print, "Our trusty and well-beloved Philip Hanbury-Erskine," as the said Commission had it—was pursued by the twin devils of restlessness and insomnia. Old memories — memories that mocked his present eminence—tore at the heart of him; and after sundry vain attempts to read, first a turgid official report and subsequently a frivolous French novel, he slipped from under his mosquito-net, and paddled barefoot on to the wide verandah that flanked his bedroom.

Leaning over the balustrade, he looked forth upon the sleeping capital of his kingdom. The

throne which he had that day ascended had been for many years the Mecca of his pilgrimage, the goal of his ambitions, the dream of a man to whom hard toil of a practical kind had left scant space for dreaming. From the verandah upon which he stood, aided by the eminence upon which Government House was set, he looked in bird's-eye fashion over the town that lay sleeping about his feet. The ethereal moonlight of south-eastern Asia spread its glamour all about, blurring and softening details, but revealing essentials as clearly as the light of day could do. Against the distant skyline the wooded cones of a little archipelago seemed to float like giant lotuses upon the surface of the glittering sea ; nearer inshore the lights of moored shipping were points of garish, crudely-red fire against the black bulks of the hulls ; immediately before them big stone buildings, huddled closely together as though striving for standing-room, marked the offices and godowns, the stores and shops of the business quarter of the town.

Sir Philip's eye passed casually over all these things—though each one of them held for him memories of a half-forgotten youth—and drawing farther inland, dwelt upon the packed yet straggling native quarter, which, beginning where the solid edifices devoted to toil and trade had their ending, covered closely some ten square miles of alluvial flat, and broke up, just as a wave sprays against a rock, around the foot of

the hill upon which Government House had its stand. Far away to the right, the bungalows of the European population gave a hint of their presence by glimpses of tiled roofs embowered in clustering vegetation.

Although the town was sleeping, from the restless native quarter there came a low, monotonous buzz and hum, that was as a familiar music in Sir Philip's ears. The pulsing of native drums, faint as a heart-beat, but instinct with a wild, half-savage unrest, came to him fitfully, like a voice crying from the past, and set his nerves tingling. The subtle scent of an Eastern bazaar—which is compact of spice and garlic and fruit, and of warm, voluptuous humanity—was borne to him, faint and enervating, upon the sauntering breezes of the night, awakening old thoughts, old memories, old desires, with a vividness that is possible only when an appeal is made to us through our sense of smell. Sight and sound and scent—each one of them so strangely, so startlingly familiar; each one of them an experience that belonged to a dim and distant past—whipped Sir Philip with a sudden craving for freedom and for youth; pricked him with an unfettered recklessness; rowelled him with a passionate hatred for the ordered present with its conventions, its formalities, its duties, its burdens, its petty responsibilities; and held forth to him as a lure the delight of one "crowded hour of glorious life" down there in the seething ant-heap of

native life—one more hour, only one, such as had been his of old.

He was a thick-set but active man, somewhat below middle size, with coarse black hair and dark, piercing eyes. He bore his fifty years more lightly than many men his juniors by a decade bore the burden of their age; and to-night memory and association had awakened in him the recklessness, the impetuosity, and something of the divine, audacious folly of youth. He was quivering like a terrier as he stood there gazing out into the night, inhaling with fierce eagerness the scents that were borne to him from the bazaar; and his grasp upon the verandah-rail tightened till the iron seemed to eat into his palms. It was to him as though he were holding on with might and main to the conventional, respectable, iron-bound realities that hem in the life of a high Colonial official; yet he held on to them, mechanically, instinctively, reluctantly—for of a sudden these things were revealed to him as harassing trivialities that were of nothing worth.

He had left this land on promotion three-and-twenty years before; and in leaving, it had always seemed to him, he had left behind him also his youth. Since then, in uncounted quarters of the Empire, he had served in this post or the other, garnering unsought honours by the way, dealing with problems of various degrees of interest, complexity, difficulty, or dulness; and climbing ever higher, higher in the Colonial

hierarchy, until now, in the fulness of time, his dearest, his only steady, ambition had been gratified, and he had returned at last to the land in which his first years of toil had been spent, to rule over it as Governor. All through those years, in climates good and bad,—climates whose unvarying heat had tanned his face to a dull, colourless brown,—the attainment of this position had ever nestled somewhere at the back of his mind as a cherished hope. Now that hope had been realised, and Philip Hanbury-Erskine, loosing his hold on the verandah-rail, threw passionate hands aloft, and broke out into the oldest and surely the bitterest of all human cries, "*O vanitas vanitatum!* Which of us has his desire, or, having it, is satisfied?"

He had won back his kingdom; but the cruelty of convention still withheld from him a taste of his vanished youth. Should it? Must it? To the devil with conventions and respectabilities!

He had loosed his hold on the verandah-rail, and with it his grip upon the staid and straitened path, in the rut of which the feet of a Colonial Governor should rest. He passed into his bedroom with a furiously beating heart, and presently youth and memory had wrought their miracle. Sir Philip Hanbury-Erskine passed, I have said, into his bedroom, but the man who presently emerged therefrom was not, to all outward seeming, Sir Philip Hanbury-Erskine. One distinguished potentate had dropped for the nonce

out of the Colonial Office List : one unconsidered entity the more had been added to the seething, shifting, brown thousands of the native quarter.

As he slipped over the rail of the ground-floor verandah—using in his exit from his own house as much caution as a thief might have adopted in effecting an entrance—he laughed to himself with a light-hearted recklessness that had not visited him for years. His staid, official self had been left among the tumbled bed-sheets and the cast-off pyjamas in his room upstairs, and with it had remained the burden of advancing age. Once free of the house and within the shelter of the black shadows cast by a clump of palms, he stamped his bare feet into the cool fragrance of the dew-drenched grass, and with difficulty restrained a shout of exultation. He was young again—young, young, young! He was going back to " his own people," as he had always affectionately called them—the people among whom his youthful days had been spent; the people whose language, thoughts, and hopes and fears had of old been as his own. He was about to dip once again into the secret wells of native life, to hear the old sounds, smell the old smells, experience the old sensations, and for a brief hour to forget that he was one upon whose shoulders Fate had imposed the burden of official greatness, with all its dwarfing, soul-stunning conventionalities. For years—such long, long weary years—he had not been suffered to be

natural, to be himself—even to be a Man. Instead, he had been only an Official, only the temporary holder of a given post—one who was so much in the public eye, in the little worlds wherein he had laboured, that his every action, his every opinion, almost his every chance word, had been regarded as legitimate subject for comment and for criticism. Now, just for once, before it was too late, before his should have become a figure too familiar in the place for such wild pranks to be possible, he would steal from the hampering fictions wherewith his life was beset one little hour of freedom absolute, of unshackled individuality, of manhood and of youth.

It is one of the many astounding facts of Asia that two sets of human lives, the white and the native, can coexist side by side in a single locality, each almost completely ignorant of the other, each barely touching its neighbour on the outside edges, and then only at rare intervals. Yet the man who is, as it were, amphibious—to whom the *terra firma* of solid British convention, and the deep waters of Oriental life, are alike familiar—finds himself stepping from one to the other at will and with an appalling suddenness. Philip Hanbury-Erskine had in the days of his youth been one of these rare amphibians; and even now his memory held the key which can unlock the gates that are barred so jealously against all but a handful of his countrymen. Within half an hour of the time that had seen him leave the

outer shell of His Excellency the Governor, the G.C.B. and the G.C.M.G., and all the rest of it, in a discarded heap upon his bedroom floor, Europe and its memories had been thrust into the obscure distance, and he was back once more in the old, old East.

His bare feet puddled the dust of the roadway, already set with the impressions of countless unshod feet ; his eyes dwelt lovingly upon the string-bedsteads placed in the five-foot ways before the native shops, and upon the white figures stretched corpse-like upon them ; the throbbing beat of drums, each thud and lilt of which held for him its inner meaning, came to his ears, the half-savage cadences keeping time to his own unrest ; the reek—the old, familiar reek—of an Asiatic bazaar, pungent, penetrating, enervating, voluptuous, pervaded the stillness of the night, and he opened wide his nostrils and snuffed it in lovingly because it awoke in him such wild visions of the past.

Noiselessly as a shadow he flitted along the broad road—flanked by native shops and by the sleeping, white-clad figures aping the likeness of the dead—and presently turned down a narrow alley on his left, where old and dilapidated houses leaned helplessly on one another's shoulders, as though overcome with weariness, their roofs nearly joining ragged hands across the crooked fairway.

" Deplorably insanitary," was the comment of Sir Philip. " Homey, homey, homey ! " cried

the new-born man in him. "Unchanged by a hair's breadth in a quarter of a century! As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be! Asia, my Asia!"

He groped his way down the straitened passage, for the bulging roofs overhead nearly excluded the moonlight, and paused presently to take his bearings

"This must be the place," he murmured to himself. "I wonder if it is unchanged too. I'll try."

He crept into the shadow, and drew near to a door sunken below the level of the alley, and rapped upon its panel with the knuckles of his hand. He rapped seven times with "dots" and "dashes," much as a telegraph operator manipulates his instrument; and a moment later the door shuddered and creaked, and then drew cautiously backward for the space of a few inches.

"*Salam Aleikum!*" said a creaking, nasal voice.

"*Aleikum salam!*" returned Sir Philip mechanically.

"Whither comest thou?" pursued the voice.

"I come," said Sir Philip—and in a flash the old jingling formula, which he had not thought upon for years, recurred to his memory—

"I come from the forests that know no paths,
From the waters that hold no fish;
From the place where the wild kite veers and sails,
Where the man-apes drink as they swing from the boughs,
Where no Law runs and where men are free!"

" Enter, Brother," said the voice, and the door stood wide.

Philip had no need for the flaring torch which the woman who had opened to him held high above her head. The narrow passage down which they were walking, with its meaningless twists and turns, was to him at that moment the most familiar thing in all the world, though his feet had not trodden it for a quarter of a century. It gave presently upon a big square room, the centre of which was filled by a raised platform or dais, covered with thick carpets, upon which near a dozen natives, men and women, were seated playing cards. The only light in the place was shed by *damar*-torches fixed in heavy wooden stands. The players glanced up at the approach of the new-comer.

" Peace be upon this house and upon all who sit therein ! " said Philip from the doorway.

" And upon thee peace ! " came in answering chorus from the card-players.

" This be a Brother who hath strayed far," piped the woman, indicating Philip with a gesture that had in it something of proud proprietorship. " His password is that of the forest ! "

The players laid down their cards and stared at Philip.

" That password hath not been used for twenty year and more," declared an old man who sat among them. " Say, little Brother, whither hast thou been, that thy password dates from the days of long ago ? "

" I have been far," said Philip ; " far, very far—farther than eye can see, farther than horse may gallop, farther than bird can fly ! Listen ! Even my mother-tongue hangs awry upon my lips ! "

" Didst thou incur the sentence of Bombay ? " asked the man quite simply. " Bombay," in the vernacular, stands for " transportation."

" Yes," said Philip, with a sullen nod ; and he felt that he spoke the truth.

" What thing led thereto ? " pursued his interrogator.

" Certain services I rendered to the Kompani," said Philip, again with perfect truth. In these lands, where the memory of " Old John Company Bahadur " still lingers, the Government continues to be known among the natives by the ancient title.

" The Kompani hath a long arm and a longer memory," said another of the card-players. " Art wise to return, my friend ? "

" Of my wisdom, Brother, I am by no means assured," said Philip, feeling that he and Truth were indeed walking hand- -hand to-night. " But thou knowest the saying : ' A golden rain in a stranger's land, and a pelt of hail in the land of thy fathers ; yet dearer ever must thine own land be.' To-night, I am feeling, according to the saying of the men of old, as feels the eel when it wins back to its mud-hole, the *sirih*-leaf to its vine, or the areca-nut to its twig ! "

"And, behold, there be yet another returned this day," piped the woman who had let him in. "'Tuan Iskin' we were wont to call him in the old days, and now he is the Tuan Gubnor who is set to rule over all our land!"

"Of old he had a man's tongue in him," said one of the card-players, a lithe, clean-limbed, sharp-featured fellow of about Philip's own age, extravagantly dressed in silks of many hues, and armed, in defiance of the white men's law, with a native *kris* of wonderful workmanship. "He and I were as brothers, close in friendship as is the quick and the nail; and the word passed amongst us that he was one of the Faithful."

"In very truth he was," screamed the woman, who had now seated herself on the edge of the dais. "Else, had he been an unbeliever, would I, Si-Bedah, have loved him?"

Philip Erskine, half hidden among the wavering shadows, looked keenly first at the man, then at the woman; and as he looked their faces came up through the mists of memory and grew plain to him, much as the face of a diver grows plain to the sight as it comes upward through still waters. Raja Sulong was the name of the man, he recalled—a roistering young scion of a royal house whose recklessness, extravagance, and courage had passed in those days into a byword. The woman—he would never unassisted have recognised her—was Bedah, the dancing-girl, of old the

cause of much "madness," as the emphatic vernacular phrase has it, to the love-lorn youths of the city. In those days she had been a dainty creature with bright eyes, sleek flower-decked hair, soft, delicately-tinted yellow cheeks, and a wondrous grace of movement. Now she was a hag, no less; for a quarter of a century brings old age to womanhood that blossoms prematurely before the teens are reached.

"But he did not love thee, mother," sneered one of the other women present—"or so men say."

"He did! He did!" screamed the woman who had of old been Bedah. "But he was not fashioned in the mould of common men. He loved me, but I was what Fate had made of me—a woman of the bazaar! He had no appetite for *sisa*—the scraps that remain when others have had their fill; wherefore he threw me to the dogs—such dogs as you, and you, and you!" And with a furious gesture she indicated several of the men present.

"Better such 'dogs,' as thou namest us, than a white man!" said one, and he turned aside to spit as a token of his unutterable disgust.

"Yet is he the only *man* that I have ever known," yelled the woman, her voice rising in tremulous, discordant sharps and flats. "He was full of pity and of compassion, like Allah's self, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

To him women-folk were not oxen to be yoked for the service of man, their master, but queens; and as a queen he treated me—*me*, Bedah, the dancing-girl of the bazaar! I loved him and he loved me; but owing to the devil of perversity within him, never did our love know happiness. Yet had I rather been loved once after a fashion such as his than a thousand times by you,—men of monstrous passions and dwarfish souls. Now hath he come back to rule over this our land, and you, who prate sedition against the Kompani and hatch clutches of addled plots, have a care, I say, have a care, for ye have now to deal with a Man!"

An angry growl broke from several of the men, and the old woman, drawing deeper into the shadows, fell to mumbling to herself as her emotions simmered away.

"To-morrow I go to him," said Raja Sulong, "and he will receive me brotherly for the sake of old days. The pig-folk of the Kompani are in sore doubt anent the free tribes of the frontier, for their minds are divided as to the quarter whence the threatened raid will come. They think, poor deluded ones, that this said raid will be like unto its forerunners—a police stockade surprised, a few slaughtered Sikhs sent screaming to the Terrible Place, some fifty villages in flames, and then retreat. They know not that the eve of the Great Combat is at hand, that the *Jehad* which shall see the extermination of the Infidel" (all present spat

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in unison at the word) " draws hourly more near, and that the Holy One of Paloh hath promised victory, final and everlasting, to the Children of the Prophet. Say, Brother," he continued, turning towards the shadow in which Philip had his seat, " hast thou also a mind to take a hand in this game of hazard which we are about to play, with men's lives for the dice and kingdoms for the stakes ? "

" Allah aiding me," said Philip from the darkness in deep, guttural tones, " I too will take some little part in the said game ! "

" And the plan, the plan ? " said a youngster eagerly. " Hath all been thought out with wisdom and with strategy ? '

" Judge ye, then ; judge ! " said Raja Sulong ; and while the rest of the party gathered about him, he proceeded, by means of the contents of a match-box, some cards, and bone counters to produce a rough map of the area which would be involved in the coming rising. Philip, watching keenly, heard the old names of men and places crop up one after the other ; and though sprinkled among them there were a few which were to him unfamiliar, in half an hour he found himself in possession of the whole of the Raja's scheme.

" And to-morrow," that worthy concluded triumphantly, " I go to Tuan Iskin, who now hath been made Governor over us, and he will receive me in brotherly fashion for the sake of old memories. Then shall I fill his ears with

false rumours and vain report ; and he, reposing in me much confidence, will order all things as we, who have framed this plan, would elect that they should be ordered. In this is plainly to be discerned the finger of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, who is mindful ever of his children."

Philip rose to his feet and stepped forth very deliberately into the full glare of the *damar*-torches.

"What doth it profit to wait for the morrow ?" he asked, in a soft and even voice. "Speak now, friend, that he whom you name Tuan Iskin may hear."

The recklessness that had been upon him that evening, as a veritable demoniacal possession, had mastered him now. Prudence had bidden him depart as he had come, undetected ; but prudence he had thrown to the winds. He knew that he had but to follow her wise counsels, and presently he would find himself safe within the walls of Government House, where, armed with the authority that belongs to rulers, he would be able to baffle utterly the paltry schemes that had been laid bare for his inspection. But to-night, for a little space, he had promised himself, he would put off the things of his authority and would pass down, for the only, for the last time, into the world of men, to be there just a man among his fellows. If he were to defeat Raja Sulong and his conspiracies, he would compass his end unaided by powers

external to himself. Therefore he rose and spoke, and waited with a tense, quivering excitement, that was all pleasurable, to see what would result.

For an instant those who heard him sat in stunned silence; then the room buzzed like a hive into which a stone has been flung. Men and women sprang to their feet—the former feeling for their weapons, the latter screaming their fear. Torches and brass ewers were overturned; bare feet scuttered and stamped; voices a-thrill with excitement gave vent to fierce ejaculations, though their tones were sunken to prudent whispers; and the flickering light of the unextinguished torches glinted upon the blades of knives held in nervous, eager hands.

A clutch fell upon Philip's arm, and he was drawn back against one of the immense bevelled pillars that stood at each corner of the dais; someone, crouching upon the floor at his feet, thrust a naked *sundang*—the stout Malayan broadsword—into his hand; and the voice of the hag, who of old had been Bedah the dancing-girl, whispered to him to be wary.

The solid wooden pillar that protected his back from all possibility of assault filled him with a splendid confidence.

"Speak now, friend, if thou hast a mind to speak," he said, and a laugh of sheer exultation broke from him. He had promised himself freedom from trammelling conventions, he had promised himself a revival of the memories of his

youth. His wildest hopes had never suggested the possibility of a rough-and-tumble such as now was imminent, a situation such as this, which belonged to what had so long seemed a closed chapter of his history. Of old, too, life had spread inviting vistas ahead of him: now he had explored them and found them empty. His supreme indifference to the event, let what would befall, steeled him with a new courage. He was having a moment of big emotions, and the rest mattered not at all.

A breathless silence had fallen upon the room, out of which there presently emerged a voice that cried, "He is a dead man! He hath mastered our secrets! He must die!"

"Hold! Hold!" cried other voices.

Suddenly there was a scuttering rush made at him by three or four men, and Philip, swinging his broadsword, heard the flat of the blade tell loudly upon the faces of his opponents. He had as yet no occasion to use the edge, for two men went down and climbed painfully out of harm's way, while their fellows drew back into the darkness. "Well struck, but why didst thou not *slay*?" piped Bedah at his feet.

A loud knocking came suddenly from the outer door, and a hushed silence followed on its heels. The knocking came again more insistent than before, blent with the rough voice of a white man demanding admittance in sadly mispronounced Malay.

"The police, the police!" whispered half a

dozen voices, and the last torch was extinguished, while bare feet pattered hastily across the mat-strewn floor.

Heavy blows were falling now upon the outer door. The police were breaking it in.

"Come, heart of my heart," whispered Bedah; and holding his hand in hers, she led him down from the dais and into some by-passage of this human rabbit-warren. Still clutching his broadsword, he followed blindly through the intense darkness; and as the shouts of the police and the hammering upon the yielding door grew faint in the distance, he found himself being led out into the moonlight.

The passage gave upon a narrow alley,—the identity of which came back to Philip's memory, as so many identities had recurred that night,—and as Philip and his guide emerged through the straitened doorway a lithe figure flung itself upon them, the moonlight glinting on a bared blade. Philip saw in a flash the nervous, muscular arm upraised, the snake-like *kris* poised aloft, the fierce face of Raja Sulong,—with flaming eyes, hair flying backward wildly, and tilted prominent chin,—and knew that the broadsword he was himself raising in his defence was stayed, as weapons are arrested in a nightmare, by the lintel of the door.

With a grunt from Raja Sulong the *kris* descended, and Philip, feeling his impotence, nerved himself to receive the blow; but with a shrill scream Bedah threw herself upon him, and

the snaky blade was buried in her back. Philip, freeing himself from her grip, leaped clear of the doorway, and concentrating all his strength and all his fury in a single stroke, brought the broadsword down upon the head of Raja Sulong, cleaving it to the cheek-bones. The man's body dropped limply across the body of the woman.

Philip, kneeling on one knee, turned Bedah on her side, and laid a hand above the region of her heart. No faintest throb responded. Stooping low above her, he kissed her reverently, and rising, turned and left her.

"A life for a life," he murmured, "and his was taken in self-defence, and hers was given for me. God forgive me this night's work, for never shall I forgive myself!"

The dawn was breaking greyly as Sir Philip Hanbury-Erskine was born once more into the official world of which he is still by no means the least distinguished ornament.

Next day, clothed and in his right mind, he wrote the famous Minute forecasting the plan of campaign which the natives were about to adopt in the threatened frontier rising—the Minute upon which rests the almost superstitious belief of his subordinates in his prescience and understanding of native character. Later, as in duty bound, he bade the police make diligent search for the author of the double murder reported to have occurred upon the previous night in an alley of the native city. Later still he opened a charity bazaar, and made

a speech so strikingly appropriate to the occasion that it has been pirated and sold widely for the benefit of uninventive country vicars.

And when the day was ended, in the dead unhappy night, he told himself that old age had come upon him in the space of a single hour.

## III

## CHOLERA ON A CHINESE JUNK

The Chinese, who are not only an intensely practical, but moreover a very wise people, hold one doctrine which commends itself more and more to the intelligence as we advance in years, and as our responsibilities keep pace with our increasing age. It is that parents are under no sort of moral obligation to support their children, but that, on the contrary, it is incumbent upon children to submit to any and every sacrifice if thereby their parents may be clad in fine linen and may fare sumptuously every day. This is a teaching for which, as every parent will readily admit, there is a great deal to be said.

Melancholy modern thought in Europe inclines to the opinion that, seeing how children are hurried into existence without their leave asked or given, the least that those responsible for their being can do is to make to them such compensation as may be possible for the irreparable injury inflicted; wherefore the latter-day parent assumes towards his offspring a quasi-apologetic attitude, toils for the little

wretches with passionate energy, and later submits in a poor-spirited fashion to the dictation of his "revolting" sons and daughters when, from the eminence of their youthful experience, they point out to him with crude brutality the folly of his antiquated ways.

Not so the practical and utilitarian Chinaman. When the new-born babe is still utterly defenceless, the parent takes full advantage of the situation and assumes once and for all the position in regard to him which he means for the future to maintain. He does not waste time in speculation as to whether the child would rather have been born, or would have preferred to remain unborn. Instead he accepts the undeniable fact that the child is there, and loses no time in impressing upon the infant the notion that he has every reason to congratulate himself upon the fact, and to thank his parents therefor. Moreover, no sooner is a Chinese infant born than his parents forthwith regard him as their chattel, to be kept or drowned, bought, sold, or given away, as the case may be, in such fashion as convenience may dictate. Also, the laws of the land, which naturally were not framed by new-born infants, give to the Chinese parent power of life and death over his children; and when your papa cannot only cane but slay you, no matter what your age or standing in society, while a retaliatory blow is punishable with an exceedingly public and ugly death, it is surprising

how easy it becomes for *pater familias* to maintain a tyrannical ascendancy over his household, and how admirable is the discipline which is wont to prevail therein. Every Chinaman, therefore, is brought up from earliest childhood thoroughly impressed with the idea that he has but a single *raison d'être*—namely, to serve, tend, and support his parents, to minister to their ease and to their comfort, and to immolate himself, even in the most extravagant fashion, if thereby this end may be accomplished.

Moreover, the Chinaman is a vastly conservative person, and his head is constructed after the manner of certain fish-traps, into which, now and again, something may stray, but out of which nothing that has once entered can ever pass. Given, therefore, the early acquisition of the notion that he only exists for the greater convenience of his parents, and in later years no known force will suffice to prise the idea out of him. All of which shows what an excellent thing it is to be the Chinese parent of a large and vigorous family.

On the other hand, judged from the white man's standpoint, there are many better billets than that of son or daughter of a Chinese father who understands and insists upon his rights; and it is only fair to Chinese parents to say that very few of them are so culpably negligent as to surrender one iota of the advantages which immemorial custom has conferred. Wherefore, in this land of topsy-turvydom, sombre and

strenuous youth toils with grave and unrelenting energy that frivolous old age may amuse itself becomingly.

Su Kim and Ah Kui were youngsters belonging to the Province of Canton, who, in common with the youth of the greater part of the Chinese Empire, had never known what it was to be young. Their filial cares sat heavy upon what in the Chinese psychology occupies the place of a human soul; for their families were remarkable for longevity, and the unhappy youths had not only their papas and mamas, but their grandparents and great-grandparents, to support. In Europe, if a man of small means find himself the harassed parent of an enormous, hungry family, he has, after all, only himself to blame. The young Chinaman, on the contrary, may be called upon to provide food and clothing for whole generations of folk to whom he owes nothing save the fact that he has been born to labour, and over whose preposterous numbers he, poor devil, can exercise no sort of control. This is why Chinese youth goes abroad for the most part with such a depressed and care-worn expression upon its yellow countenance.

Su Kim and Ah Kui met one evening at the little opium shop of the village, not to buy thrice-smoked dross for themselves, but to procure the best form of the drug that they could afford wherewith to soothe the tempers

of their respective families—tempers which age and long habits of tyranny had made querulous and irritable. They inquired after the health of their respective wards with much elaboration and politeness; and it probably never so much as occurred to either of them to think, far less to express the thought, that it would be more of a blessing than a calamity if some of the old people were to begin to break up. After all, it is wonderful how patiently men will fit into an insupportable situation when once they have become inured to it by long familiarity.

These preliminaries over, they fell to talking of ways and means, and found themselves in hearty agreement on the subject of the hardness of the times. The poor young fellows shook grave heads over the position, and asked one another how matters were to end. Even in a land where a man can live in what passes for a high state of comfort for £3, 12s. *per annum*, the care of a whole collection of dependent elders presents a sore puzzle in economics to the family bread-winner.

A big gross Chinaman, who was lying on a mat-covered bunk, delicately toasting a little bubbling mass of opium at the end of a thin skewer, transferred the stuff suddenly to the tiny hole in his opium pipe, drew in half a dozen deep, luxurious breaths, blew the smoke out through nose and mouth in filmy clouds, and then turned upon his elbow.

"Friends," he said, addressing Su Kim and Ah Kui, to whom he was a stranger, "you speak truly when you declare that these be evil times. A full stomach maketh a contented soul, but how shall the soul be contented when the belly is empty?"

"Very true," murmured Su Kim and Ah Kui; and then, addressing one another, they added in stage whispers: "This honourable gentleman is obviously a philosopher of learning and discretion. His words are words of wisdom."

"'The superior man may have to endure want, but he is still the superior man. The small man in the same circumstances loses his self-command,'" said the stranger, quoting a saying of the great Confucius.

"He is indeed a wonderful philosopher!" ejaculated the two young men.

"But the superior man does not tamely submit to want," continued the stranger. "And if he hath piety and an understanding of the duty he bears to his parents, he will take steps to prevent want coming upon those whom it is his business to support."

"True," said Ah Kui; "but how may this miracle be worked?"

"I question whether you be worthy of this revelation," said the stranger, turning once more to delicate operations with the opium-skewer.

"We are in truth dishonourable dogs, most

genteel sir," said Su Kim, with becoming humility, " and indeed we are not worthy to hold converse with one of thy patent wisdom and integrity. Yet would this obscure person crave enlightenment from thine illustrious explanation."

The big gross man drew in and blew out more smoke, and for the nonce appeared to ignore the presence of the two young peasants.

" How," asked Su Kim of Ah Kui, " how can ten cash be made to perform the service of fifty ? "

" 'Tis a problem," rejoined Ah Kui, " that surpasseth the ingenuity of this person, and might well baffle the wisdom of the most profound philosophers."

The big gross man emitted a sound which was part grunt, part sneering laugh, and wholly derisive.

" ' I do not believe that the elephant can see over the tops of the blades of grass ! ' quoth the ant," said he, and emitted the obnoxious sound once more.

Ah Kui was greatly abashed. Su Kim was lost in admiration of the stranger's wisdom and learning.

" This honourable sir," he said to his comrade, " is a prince of poets, who compresses within his single illustrious personality all the learning and science of the ancients."

The big man, after various ungainly rollings and convulsions, got himself into a sitting

posture on the bunk. He smiled upon Su Kim with benevolent approval.

"Young sir," he said, "thou dost display signs of possessing some rudiments of intelligence." (Su Kim blushed with gratification. In his family circle he was well used to querulous complaints, but little accustomed to approval, or to finding himself the recipient of stately compliments such as this.) "And because I love intelligence, even in the most lowly, I will open to thee the store of my wisdom, and will show to thee and to thy friend here how wealth may be garnered, and the future of thy respectable parents most honourably assured."

He beckoned the two young men nearer, and with an air of the greatest mystery, as though he were imparting some precious secret to them as an act of especial and almost divine condescension, began to lay before them his proposals. There was situated somewhere across the seas, it would appear, an island with an unpronounceable name, ruled over by a race of red-headed devils called Ba-lan-da (Hollanders), who grew tobacco in great quantities, and who paid fabulous wages to likely young men whose good fortune selected them for labour upon the plantations. The account of this Tom Tiddler's land, where gold and silver was to be picked up so easily, came flowingly and embellished by much eloquent rhetoric from his lips; for this sublime philosopher was a professional "crimp" or recruiting agent, and knew his business from

*a* to *z*. His hearers had often met men who had gone to the mines of the Malay Peninsula as indentured labourers. They knew dozens of families who lived in comfort upon the remittances so faithfully made by their sons from oversea. They had even themselves thought now and again, in moments of desperation, of seeking their fortunes in distant lands, as the only means open to them of supporting their hungry parents; but such was the eloquence and the magnetism of their present instructor that it seemed to them as though the ideas which he was now putting before them were wholly new. Never had they realised that the path to affluence lay so close ahead of them, waiting only to be trodden by their eager feet. How could they know anything about the difference which exists between lawfully indentured labourers and the batches of unhappy wretches whom enterprising Chinese capitalists send now and again to the Dutch Colonies as a purely private speculation?

Their natural caution, however, prevailed sufficiently to prevent them from closing with the crimp's proposals at once. The commercial instinct, which is born in every Chinaman, led them to hold out for one, two, three evenings, while they haggled for a larger sum down. But, as the crimp well knew, the bait once nibbled at was sure to be swallowed sooner or later. Otherwise, what would have been the use of possessing a persuasive tongue, a most superior

manner, a vast experience of the business, and an overpowering personality? In other words, what would have been the value of the big gross man's sole stock-in-trade?

The issue was never in serious doubt, and in the end Su Kim and Ah Kui sold themselves body and soul to labour on Sumatran tobacco plantations for thirty-five silver dollars down—a sum sufficient to keep the old folks at home for a matter of several months—and a visionary prospect of future wealth.

Su Kim and Ah Kui tramped down to Canton,—that most villainous of all Eastern cities,—and there were driven, much like the silly sheep they resembled, on board a big junk. It was a huge, round-bellied, blunt-nosed affair, with a knowing-looking fish's eye on either side of the prow, such as has crept up and down the seas of south-eastern Asia any time during the past five thousand years. The accommodation and the comfort which it afforded were also inventions of remote antiquity, inventions upon which the stolid conservatism of the Chinese had forbidden any improvements to be made. There was a huge rusty water-tank fore and aft, a mud fire-place amidships, full rice sacks just out of reach of the bilge, a store of indifferently salted fish which smelt like a neglected charnel-house, and a hundred and forty-seven new-caught Chinese peasants, packed toe to toe and knee to knee, on both decks, like sardines in a vat. The dis-

comfort was of a kind to destroy the reason of the least sensitive European; but Su Kim and Ah Kui belonged to a race whose members look upon a half-pound tobacco tin standing perpendicularly as a luxurious pillow, and can watch the amputation of their own limbs with curiosity and interest. They were nearly suffocated on the lower deck, but they loved a "fug," and those above them in the purer air envied them the closeness of their atmosphere. They were abominably cramped, and they slept leaning and nodding against one another, or with their feet thrust into their neighbours' faces; but these things irked them no more and no less than the restrictions of board-ship life on a liner irk the average white man. Two of the great national assets of the Chinese are their indifference to discomfort and their extraordinary toughness.

The crew—five Chinamen scorched nearly black by constant exposure to the sun—hoisted the great squares of ruddy canvas with much unnecessary outcry; and the huge junk, endowed suddenly with ungainly life, waddled out on to the bosom of the China Sea. Then above and below decks things began to happen. No one who has observed his fellow-creatures enduring the agonies of a Channel crossing can have failed to be struck by the completeness with which sea-sickness deprives men and women alike of their natural reserve, sense of decency, and self-respect. This applies to

people who ordinarily have at their command no small stock of these qualities; but when sea-sickness descends upon one hundred and forty-seven Chinese peasants,—who even in the most favourable circumstances are by no means conspicuous for these virtues,—and when these unhappy people are packed like herrings in a tub, the result is of a kind which it could afford no conceivable pleasure to anyone to read about.

The visitation endured for three whole days and nights, during which period Su Kim, Ah Kui, and their one hundred and forty-five companions lay about like dead men upon a battle-field, and with not an atom more of fight left in them. When the Oriental collapses, it should be noted, he collapses very thoroughly. Towards the end of the fourth day, a partial resurrection took place, and yellow men of a ghastly pallor—their necks disfigured by horrible purple bruises caused by self-inflicted pinches and twistings of the flesh produced as a counter-irritant—began to lift their heads above the general level of carnage. Later, recovery became more general, and rice in quantities with fish to match was devoured; but two of the passengers remained obstinately on their backs, and upon these the Chinese captain and the chin-chu, or super-cargo, held an impassive inquest. The men, they decided without emotion, were moribund; and it is well known that it is bad luck to have one of a company die on board a ship or under the shelter of a roof. It is the custom of the junks which

crawl about the China Sea to put in here and there at certain deserted places to replenish their stock of cooking fuel, since elsewhere such supplies have to be purchased, whereas here they are to be had for the taking. Accordingly, at the first stopping-place the two invalids were put ashore, and left there. At first, poor wretches, they were so thankful to find themselves once more upon *terra firma* that they hardly realised their position; but presently, when they understood that they were to be abandoned in their helpless condition, they raised feeble cries of protest and entreaty. But here the "hardness" of the Chinese character, to which allusion has already been made, was manifested. The dying men had just been flung out upon the sand; no covering or protection from the sun had been afforded them. It was not even certain that the spot upon which they lay was above high-water mark. If they did not die of disease, they would certainly die of hunger, thirst, and exposure. Also they belonged to a company, one hundred and forty-seven strong, each of whose members knew himself to be liable to similar treatment if his health broke down; yet not only was no finger raised in their defence, but their companions actually lent a hand in getting them ashore and leaving them to their fate. All the folk on board the junk were engaged in an enterprise of a speculative financial character, and no one was prepared to see his chances jeopardised from the start by anything notoriously calculated to

bring ill luck in its train. After all, the Chinese are not the only financial operators who in their time have regarded the sacrifice of a human life or two as a matter of slight moment if weighed in the balance with the success of a "deal"; only the Chinese, who are endowed with a peculiarly cynical frankness of their own upon occasion, do not cover up their cruelty with the skill which is thought to be decent in other lands.

The junk crept onward, her speed steadily maintained as she ran before the monsoon; and presently the south-westerly course was altered, and she began to beat through the clusters of islands which guard the southern extremity of the Straits of Malacca. Here she met baffling winds, and the heat on both decks was terrific; also, with the broaching of a new water-tank, her troubles came upon her headlong. Three of the passengers fell ill one evening, and died with a rapidity so startling that there was no time in which to deal with them as with their two predecessors in misfortune. This, of course, was "very bad Joss" indeed; but that in itself was not enough to account for the horror with which the survivors looked into one another's eyes as, in the pitiless grey dawn, they heaved the bodies to the sharks. The corpses were not pretty to look at. Their yellow faces were the unwholesome colour of clay; the cheeks had fallen in, the eye-sockets were cavernous, the bones of the forehead were huge protuberances, the stomachs were extraordinarily concave, the

finger-tips were puckered curiously. And all this was the work of a bare three hours' illness in the heart of the night. No Chinese peasant on board needed any man to tell him that this was the assault of the arch-enemy,—of the "Chilly Death," of Cholera.

In Asia, where the majority of men live amid such insanitary surroundings as beggar description, there is nothing that breeds a panic so universal as the coming of the "Chilly Death." If it smites men ashore, they fly headlong, whither they know not, bearing devastation with them in their frantic efforts to escape. When it deals its blows amid circumstances which preclude the possibility of flight, it cows those who behold its ravages in a fashion which is paralysing. Su Kim and Ah Kui and their companions were cowed now. They sat with their noses between their knees, looking fearfully and furtively at one another, possessed by an awful expectancy, asking themselves over and over again the tremendous question: Who will be the next?

They had not long to wait. By noon of that day there were half a dozen fresh cases; by nightfall the victims numbered two score, and the place was a shambles. Fear—blind, masterless fear—ruled that human company. Above them by day was the clear, pale Malayan sky, out of which the sun struck downward as with the blows of a white-hot hammer; around them was the glassy floor of the sea, its waters of an

extraordinary colourless tint, its oily surface unbroken by so much as a ripple ; on the skyline to the west the coast hills of Sumatra sat and shimmered through the heat-haze, a mist-like outline of a blue fainter than that of sea or sky. The big sails flapped lazily or hung motionless as a pall. Everything was still, peaceful, appallingly emotionless, except where overhead kites and carnivorous sea-fowl hovered constantly with an odious suggestiveness in their persistent attendance. The intense heat was an aggressive force which seemed to cut with blades of flame into the bodies, the brains, the very souls of its victims ; and all day long the great clumsy junk, helpless as some wounded monster, lay almost motionless upon the burning floor of the sea, under the blazing roof of the sky, with the deep, calm, indifferent peace of the inanimate universe around her, and all the horrors of hell within.

The sun sank to its rest in a glory of purple and gold ; the short, sad gloaming of the tropics followed, and was succeeded by the damp, salt coolness of the night ; and ever the tale of the stricken grew longer and longer. Just before the dawn a breeze sprang up, and the sails filled at last. By daybreak the junk was travelling at a fair pace, and the shores of Sumatra were becoming distinct to the eye. Three of the crew of five were dead or dying ; of the one hundred and forty-five passengers more than half were in a like case.

The survivors' one idea was to get ashore. They had a half-crazy conviction that if this could be accomplished they would somehow or another contrive to escape from the demon which was devouring them. Logical thought was little likely to survive the experiences of the past day and night. Even the stolid imagination of the Chinese required no quickening amid such surroundings. For some thirty hours these poor wretches had sat helpless and hopeless among the dead and the dying; among men in the first disgusting and agonising stages of the disease; among others sunken in the hideous coma that marks the collapse; among the newly stricken, out of whose eyes looked a very devil of fear, entreating and lamenting; among the awful, still forms of those whose struggles were ended — for the survivors had not enough of spirit left in them to heave their dead overboard. And all the while each man in that ghastly company had waited with anxious terror to detect in himself the first symptoms of the disease—symptoms with which he had now gained so appalling a familiarity. There was madness too as well as cholera aboard the stricken junk, for here and there one upon whose mind the strain imposed had proved to be too intense raved with an abominable obscenity of speech, or moped and mowed like the feeble phantom of a lost soul; while others raised their voices in discordant and unmeaning song. For the

most part, however, the survivors sat still, paralysed by despair, watching with fearful eyes the scenes which were being enacted around them; offering no aid to the sufferers; robbed alike of all hope, all initiative, all spirit, but endowed suddenly with a dreadful capacity for acute feeling and apprehensive imagining.

The sight of the coast,—which every moment made more distinct, so that from the deck of the junk the contour of cliff and scarp, the very trees upon the hills, were presently visible—lighted up a tiny flicker of hope in many breasts; but some of the passengers were by now too dazed to be capable of receiving any impression other than that of their individual misery. The captain of the junk recognised the spot which he had struck, and remarked to the chin-chu that no landing could there be effected. He began to head up the coast, keeping upon a course parallel with it, and at about ten o'clock in the morning a little Dutch harbour opened up upon the port bow. Here was salvation at last, and hope strong and vigorous sprang into sudden life in many breasts. A little hum of human speech began to make itself heard, and many of these men of an emotionless race found hard, painful tears oozing grudgingly from their eyes.

The casualties among the crew, and the state of semi-imbecility to which the survivors were reduced, caused the junk to be sailed in a fashion

so unhandy as to attract the attention of the shore authorities; and before the entrance to the harbour was made, a little armed steam-launch, with two portly Dutch officials on board, came pattering up to examine her. A Chinese interpreter hailed the junk and inquired what was amiss with her; but the question was self-answered. The deck was strewn with the dead and the dying: the vessel shouted her scandal to all the universe.

"God in heaven!" said the senior Dutch official to his fellow. "Saw you ever the like? It is cholera—black cholera; and enough of it to decimate the whole population of Sumatra. Here you, coxswain! Keep to the windward of her! Do you hear me? To the windward, you pig! *Juru-bhasa* (Interpreter)! Tell them they cannot enter this port. Tell them that it is forbidden to them to land anywhere in Sumatra. Tell them that I will sink them rather than let them bring this cursed plague into the country."

The *Juru-bhasa*, leaning over the railing of the launch, yelled these orders to the junk, and in an instant her inmates, wakened out of their paralysis, were fighting for standing-room upon her slippery decks; were pleading, entreating, lamenting, bewailing, praying for mercy, with strained, agonised faces; with extravagant gesticulations; with frantic appeal of voice and gesture.

It was an appalling spectacle to witness—

this unrestrained and collective expression of human emotion; this crowd of men, so pitiful in their desperation and their impotence, pleading for life as they spurned, in the agony of their excitement, the dead and the dying heaped about their feet. Both the Dutch officers turned away sick with horror and with a kind of shame. It was appalling to feel that they were condemning these poor wretches to an ugly death without hope of reprieve.

"Can we not let them land?" asked the younger of the two officers pleadingly.

"How can we?" cried the other, in sudden rage. "There is no possibility of segregating them. It is better that these men should die than that the plague should be brought to ravage Sumatra. I cannot take that responsibility. No: they must not be allowed to land. It is horrible, but what will you? We must think of others. These men have no claim on us."

It took a long time to drive home to the intelligence of the men on board the junk an understanding of the fact that the order which doomed them was unalterable; and long ere this was accomplished the two Dutchmen were themselves upon the verge of a nervous breakdown. You may be quite clear as to your duty, but it is an awful thing to be called upon not only to give an order of such a character as this, but actually to supervise its execution. Gradually the conviction that landing was

indeed forbidden to them, and that with the armed launch hovering about them they stood no chance of being able to evade her vigilance, gained ground among the miserable folk on board the junk, and little by little the clamour of entreaty died down ; the appalling silence which succeeded, the silence of cold despair, being punctuated only by an occasional shrill outcry. The captain and the chin-chu held hurried consultation. Sumatra was closed to them. They must cross the Straits and try to effect a landing on the shores of the Malay Peninsula. They had failed to fool the Dutch : perhaps they would succeed in deceiving the English.

At the point where the junk found herself, the Straits of Malacca measure something like a hundred and twenty miles across ; but the sea-wind had died down, and a fresh breeze blowing off the land had succeeded it. The intention of the captain and the chin-chu was presently whispered among the crew. The plan offered a last chance of escape—a poor chance, perhaps, but dying men cling to even the slenderest hope with the energy of despair. It *was* a hope, and it manned them to a last effort. Landsmen and sailors alike threw themselves upon the tackle with a species of frenzy ; labouring with feverish, unhandy limbs, propelled by the fierce instinct of self-preservation. The dead and the dying were all unheeded, as their comrades trampled upon them, straining at the cordage ; the

captain at the tiller yelled directions ; the chinchu danced among the toilers, screaming his advice ; and slowly, reluctantly, grudgingly, awkwardly, the big junk came about, and began to head in an easterly direction. The Dutch officers heaved each a sigh of relief ; but they hung upon the skirts of the junk until she was half-way across the Straits and the descending darkness hid her from their view.

Thereafter, for the panic-stricken creatures on board the junk, there ensued another fearful night. To make more room for the living and the dying, a number of the dead had been heaved over the low bulwarks ; but those that remained were still all too numerous. The night was profoundly dark, the blackness being picked out only by the lights at the mast-head and on the port and starboard bows. Between decks two villainous oil-lamps hung and stank, the garish light which they flung around revealing figures, forms, faces, and other things which it had been more merciful to hide from sight. And once again the fear and the expectancy, the awful waiting for his own turn to come, settled down cold, paralysing, heavy as lead, upon the heart of each member of that sorry crew. The hours dribbled by with an appalling slowness, as though each grudging moment lingered beyond its ordinary wont. Again the silence would be broken once in a while, not only by the groans of the sufferers, the sound of their agonised vomiting, and an occasional pro-

longed death-rattle where a man yielded up a too vigorous life with pain and tremendous struggles, but also by the demented outcries of those whose nerves and brains had given way under the pitiless strain.

Of these latter Ah Kui now was one. Su Kim, who sat crouching beside him, had maintained a stolid silence for hours; but earlier he had spoken to his friend without winning from him any response. About midnight Su Kim awoke out of a restless, broken sleep,—during the whole of which he had never for an instant been freed from the consciousness of the hideous situation in which he and his fellows were placed,—to find Ah Kui babbling with torrential energy to himself. The voice reached the listener through the gloom—familiar, yet unfamiliar; the voice of Ah Kui—the same, yet strangely unlike itself. The words poured out with an extraordinary fluency, crowding and shouldering, tripping over one another's heels; and Su Kim heard familiar names of men and women, of places and things, which had belonged to the far-away life in China, which the two men had shared together, come up one by one to sigh and sob through the darkness. To him this experience, with its torturing reminiscence of home, was inexpressibly agonising. It sawed at his frayed nerves, and haunted him with new, vague fears. He tried to stop his ears; but that voice, which spoke of home with so mocking a futility, babbled on relentlessly, and *would* be heard. Su Kim's

brain too began to totter ere the dawn broke, grey and woe-begone, to usher in yet another day.

An hour after daybreak the babbling of Ah Kui ceased, but he began forthwith to develop the earlier symptoms of cholera. Su Kim drew away from him. At once the identity of his friend was in a fashion lost, being swallowed up in the fact that he too had been singled out as a victim of the demon which possessed the junk. He ceased to be Ah Kui : he became only another man dying of cholera, and a potential centre of infection — an enemy breathing death.

The long hot morning dragged itself noonward, and Ah Kui passed with more than usual slowness and struggle through all the symptoms of the disease. Su Kim, huddled up in his corner, watched him with horror and fear; but the scant stock of sympathy wherewith a Chinaman is provided had long ago been exhausted. Su Kim, in common with every other survivor on board, had now but a single care, a single preoccupation—how to save *himself*, let the devil take whom he would.

The chin-chu, who had fallen ill during the night, died a little before midday, but the captain was still untouched. About two o'clock in the afternoon he called all the survivors on deck, and something under fifty men answered his summons.

" Yonder," said the captain, "lies the port of

Klang. It too is ruled by red-headed foreign devils, as was the harbour we tried to enter yesterday. Once again, mayhap, they will turn us away to die in this hell-ship on the open seas. Therefore, with cunning and discretion, must we make all things proper, so that no man may detect that aught is amiss on board. Do you understand, good sirs ? "

The crowd of haggard, hollow-eyed, panic-stricken men nodded their comprehension : then very methodically they began the work that lay before them. First they heaved overboard all the dead. It took time, and made a heavy call upon their spent energies. Then they looked at the sick and dying, and from them to the captain.

" We must remove *all* signs," said he grimly ; and again they nodded their concurrence.

Working in little knots of half a dozen, they seized the sick men each in turn, bore them passive or fiercely resisting to the bulwarks, and toppled them into the sea. Some cried out, pleading for a last chance of life with fearful energy ; others fought tooth and nail with the dumb ferocity of wild cats ; others again, sunken deeply in utter collapse, lay like logs in the grip of the men who held them. Much time was occupied in the sombre work, but those who addressed themselves to it toiled with a grim and methodical determination. From their expressionless countenances it would have been impossible for an onlooker to guess whether they

experienced any special emotion ; only as Ah Kui, the last of all, splashed into the sea, calling upon his friend by name with passionate entreaty, Su Kim winced as though he had been struck.

But the task was still only half completed. The ship had to be cleansed of all traces of the tragedies which it had witnessed, and this was a work that occupied more than an hour. Each man had been so intently engaged upon his individual share of the toil that no one had noticed that the weather had changed. The favouring wind had dropped completely. The big red sails flapped limply. The junk still moved onward in the desired direction, but she moved not by the aid of wind, but borne forward by an irresistible current. And now she did not move alone, for all about her—some riding high, with loosely flung limbs and upturned beseeching faces ; others wallowing in pitiful impotence ; some with arms that seemed to beckon clumsily ; others with a grotesque air of floundering mockery ; others again with fixed eyes and rigid countenances dreadfully accusing—there floated a horrible escort.

The men on the junk drew together in a mob, like frightened cattle, seeking comfort and refuge from their terrors in physical contact with other living, breathing, human beings ; but all eyes were fixed in horror upon that awful, jostling multitude. The current was bearing them shoreward at the same pace as the junk, and

there was no escape from them. The dead were dogging the living; and the survivors, possessed by the notion that there was being wreaked upon them a grotesque and appalling vengeance, huddled together, almost bereft of their senses, and robbed of all ability to make further effort for their own preservation. Those dipping and bobbing horrors rising and falling on the long swell compelled all eyes to watch them. From this there was no release, and presently, as Su Kim stood with his gaze glued to Ah Kui, he saw the dead man fling himself suddenly into an erect posture, with arms thrown wide in slack gesticulation, and then sink downward. A shrill scream broke from Su Kim's throat, to be lost in the vastness of the skies, and a thin foam dappled his lips. A portion of Ah Kui reappeared presently, and several of his neighbours were animated in turn much as he had been. The presence of half a dozen great black fins moving here and there among the escort of the dead explained the phenomenon; but Su Kim was not comforted. With his own eyes he had seen the friend, who dying had called upon his name, rise up in death in awful accusation.

The sharks were busy, but the feast prepared for them was over-abundant. They could not cope with it, and their efforts had little effect in reducing the number of the junk's ghastly followers. As the afternoon began to wane, Su Kim and his companions were borne by the current into the harbour of Klang, and with them

came, rolling and rollicking on the swell, the grim host of their accusers.

"The Dutch authorities wired warning to Singapore," said the Medical Officer, "and the word was passed to us from Malacca. We kept a bright look-out, and when we sighted the junk there was no lack of evidence. They had cleaned her up wonderfully, and on board there was nothing wrong at all; but all around her were the poor devils they had chucked overboard. The men on board the junk had not a kick left in them. They seemed more than half dead with fright.

"Do? What did we do? Oh, well, we rounded up the corpses first. One had to think of the effect on the fishing industry. Then we towed the junk to the quarantine island, buried the dead in a deep pit with lots of quicklime, and camped the survivors out. We only lost three of them, and the others are working in the mines, and most of them making a pot of money, I expect—they generally do.

"Prosecute? No, what was the use? You could prove nothing. The question of jurisdiction was one difficulty, I understand; and nobody could swear that the deaders had been thrown overboard while they were still alive. The absence of any sick man on board was suspicious, of course; but even so, can one blame the poor beggars? Remember that the Dutch had refused them entry; and then a

Chinaman does not rate life—I mean other folks' lives—as highly as we do. Besides, God help the best of us if he were to find himself as they did, between the devil and the deep."

And at that the matter stands.

## IV

## THE FAMILIAR SPIRIT

SEVEN-AND-TWENTY years ago there lived on the banks of a large river which flows into the Straits of Malacca a King and the King's Heir. The latter was not the King's son, but only some form of cousin or nephew ; for in the State where they lived the succession is arranged somewhat curiously. There are three great officers in this land—the King, the King's Heir, and the Bendahara ; and when in the fulness of time the King dies, his heir succeeds him, while the Bendahara attains the rank of next in succession, the dignities of the Bendahara's post meanwhile falling to the lot of the eldest son of the deceased monarch. The virtue of this arrangement is that the ruler of the land is always the eldest son of a King ; has had ample time to outgrow the rashness and the unrestrained passions of early youth ; and has further qualified himself for the throne by years of service in subordinate positions. There is so much to be said in favour of this system that it cannot but fill one with admiration for the excellent theorist who devised it in the beginning. In practice, however, it

had some obvious disadvantages. A Malay King had usually an instinctive horror of his Heir, even when the latter was his own flesh and blood; and when the man who occupied this position chanced to be a mere relation, this aversion was multiplied exceedingly. The King was apt to feel that his own son was being unfairly treated; and, since he held power in his hands, he was sorely tempted to use up his Heir and the Bendahara more speedily than Nature intended, thus adopting a simple method of raising his son to the rank of King's Heir with as little delay as possible. When this had been accomplished, he might begin to perceive that another of his sons was the more worthy; and since he had got his hand in by practice upon the vile bodies of the late Heir and the deceased Bendahara, he might experience some difficulty in drawing the line at the proper place, and in refraining from sending his first-born to hobnob with the injured ghosts of his predecessors.

This system of succession had another disadvantage, for the King's Heir was not bound by very close ties to the King; and if the latter developed signs of unseemly longevity, mere murder, and not the more horrible crime of parricide, was necessary for his removal. This represented an obvious temptation difficult to resist; and the Bendahara, who has two people between him and the throne, found himself exposed to it in a twofold degree. At the time of which I write, however, primitive ideas of the

fitness of things had been put somewhat out of gear by the presence of the calm and strangely impassive British Government ; and though all men hated the King, no one dreamed of aiding Nature to remove him from the earth, to which his presence was an obvious insult.

The King lived on the left bank of the river, and the Heir had his home on the right bank, two hundred yards across the running water. This was in a way symbolical, for the King and his Heir were in constant opposition, and the latter was invariably on the right side. A few miles up-stream, in a long straggling village which lined the waters of the river for a couple of miles, lived Megat Pendia, a thin and sour-faced man, with bleared, bloodshot eyes, shifty and vicious. This individual was much feared in his village and for many miles around, for he was reported to be a wizard ; and one day a petition, bearing some hundreds of signatures, was presented to the Resident, praying for his expulsion from the State. The petition gave chapter and verse for a dozen deaths, each one of which could be traced to the Familiar Spirit which, speaking from the mouths of the stricken folk, hailed Megat Pendia as its father.

The petition was obviously ridiculous, and no sensible man, of course, would lend an ear to it. How can educated Englishmen, who know so many things, and are withal so thoroughly enlightened, take a serious view of such an absurdity ? But the State in question had then

but recently come under British protection, and the wise man who was at that time its Resident cared far less for the opinions of educated and enlightened Englishmen than for the peace and happiness of the people over whom he ruled. He saw at once that action of some sort must be taken in order to allay the fears of the superstitious natives; he knew that it was hopeless to attempt to persuade them that Megat Pendia was no wizard, but merely a mild, though evil-looking, old gentleman with bloodshot eyes. Therefore, as he was too just a man to allow Megat Pendia to be driven from his home, or to be otherwise punished, he instructed me to aid the King's Heir in administering a rebuke to the wizard for his evil practices, and in solemnly warning him of the troubles that would fall upon him if he did not mend his ways.

The natives were loud in their prayers that Megat Pendia's neck might be fixed in the fork of a bough, and that he might then, for a space, be held under water with his face in the mud. Were this done, they declared, the swarm of grasshoppers that would arise from out the water would abundantly prove his guilt. I fear that I, in my youthful curiosity, regretted that the Resident could not see his way to applying this simple test; for I had so often heard Malays speak of this phenomenon as an invariable result of the immersion of a wizard that I was anxious to witness it with my own eyes. This, however, was not to be; and accordingly, one

sunny afternoon Megat Pendia was called before the King's Heir and myself to receive his warning. The Heir was in a woeful fright, and nothing could hide the fear in his eyes; while I found it difficult to maintain the solemn face which the occasion demanded.

Megat Pendia shuffled in and squatted humbly on the ground, but his wicked little eyes blinked and glared at us most evilly. I had no doubt that the man firmly believed himself to be a wizard, and I was determined that he should be taught that there was risk in trying to frighten people; wherefore, as this part of the business had been allotted to me, I held forth glibly upon the wickedness of witchcraft in general, and of Megat Pendia's conduct in particular, with the withering pungency to which the Malay language lends itself. The Heir grew obviously more unhappy as the talk went on, while Megat Pendia glared at us with his sullen, angry eyes, and from time to time the Raja broke in with words designed to propitiate and conciliate the wizard. In the end our victim promised solemnly, with many heavy oaths, never again to allow his Familiar One to feast on the blood of men. "If he craves milk or eggs, I will supply them," said the Heir; for all men know that Familiars can live, almost happily, inside a bamboo case, if they be given these things to eat in plenty. But Megat Pendia took no notice of my friend's offer, and strode away muttering sullenly to himself. I had not a

doubt of the expediency of what we had done, for without it Megat Pendia's own life might not have been too safe, and the people of the district would have known little ease or peace had no notice been taken of their petition. Nevertheless, I felt somewhat sorry for the disreputable old creature, who had probably done little evil, even though he believed himself to have dabbled successfully in black magic, and had undoubtedly been at some pains to frighten his fellows into a similar conviction.

For a time I heard nothing more, good or bad, concerning Megat Pendia; but a month or so later I chanced to cross the river to pay one of my many business visits to the King. He was an exceptionally unpleasant person, but for some reason which I can never explain, and dimly feel was undoubtedly to my discredit, he and I were on very friendly terms. Accordingly, all minor business which had to be transacted with him was usually entrusted to me, and I was as familiar a figure in his house as were any of his own people.

I found him as usual sitting cross-legged on a long rattan chair, bare to the waist, with no cap or kerchief on his shaven head, and with a bulging quid of coarse Javanese tobacco wedged in between his gums and his lips. In his hand he held a pair of nippers, attached to a long silk handkerchief, with which, from time to time he plucked a hair from his chin or body. Before entering his compound I could hear his roar, and

the queer break of the notes when his voice ran up the scale in its excitement to a perilously high pitch. I gathered from this (for I knew my King well) that he had recently done something mean or wicked, and was proportionately angry with his victim, whom he was now denouncing to all who sat within his gates. As I climbed up the stair ladder I could see his arm and the fist which held the nippers waving about his head to mark the periods of his speech ; and he only dropped his voice to greet me, before breaking out into a fresh torrent of abuse and self-justification. One of his people brought me a chair, and I sat down and listened.

Megat Pendia, who was not present, was the cause of all these loud words and angry gesticulations. The wizard looked as though he were a contemporary of Merlin, and it was therefore something of a shock to me to learn that his mother had till quite lately been living. I was a little reassured when I ascertained that she was now dead, for extreme age is more unlovely in a Malayan woman than in any other of God's creatures ; and when I further heard that her son had made her funeral a pretext for an attempt to borrow money from the King, I began to understand the reason of his wrath. Megat Pendia's mother was, in some sort, a relation of the King's favourite concubine, and, as he sat roaring in his long chair, the monarch was evidently aware that he had behaved shabbily in refusing the loan.

Also, conceivably, he was working himself into a rage with a view to preparing himself for the bitter things which the pretty lips of his lady would probably have to say concerning his conduct. Perhaps, too, he was a little afraid of the wizard's powers, though courage was the one and only virtue which relieved the Egyptian darkness of the King's character. But above all things the King was a miser, and the sense of duty and expediency had alike been lost sight of when the right thing could only be done by opening his beloved money-bags.

Of his present state of excitement I needed no explanation, for, when the Oriental Bank had broken a few months before, I had seen the naked soul of the miser looking out of the King's eyes while he sat panting, and wiping the beads of sweat from his face and neck, as pile after pile of greasy, flabby notes came up in turn for examination and sentence. I had known him do a thousand meannesses to those who might well have looked to him for kindness in return for long service and deep devotion ; and I had never yet witnessed an occasion when his love of money had found a conqueror in any purer emotion.

Megat Pendia, I was told by the trembling inmates of the King's compound, had returned to his home muttering angrily, and presaging grievous trouble for the King in the guise of visitations from another world ; and though the people hated the master whom they served,

they had no wish to see him die. "Where shall the vermin feed if not upon the head?" asks the Malay proverb; and a man of rank can always find a crowd of idlers to cluster about him, just as the leanest pig in the jungle has no lack of parasites.

Shortly after this a woeful illness fell upon the King, and while he was yet conscious he sent word to me to cross the river and join the crowd that sat about his head. He lay on a mat in the *balai*, or reception-room, of his house, that he might die as publicly as possible, with many to help him "through the strait and awful pass of death." The room was large and bare, with no furniture on the mat-covered floors save only the thick mattress upon which the King lay, a brazier filled with red-hot embers, and one or two large brass spittoons. Two or three badly trimmed oil-lamps hung smoking from the ceiling, throwing a bright light upon the sick man, and filling the corners of the room with shapeless masses of shadow. The place was crammed with Malays, of both sexes and all ages and conditions. The Heir had visited the sick-room earlier in the day, and genuine tears of compassion had borne testimony to the known goodness of his heart; but his presence had occasioned such a paroxysm of wrath on the part of the King that he had been hustled somewhat unceremoniously out of the compound. The room was abominably close, and the air

was heavy with the pungent smoke from the brazier and the reek of kerosene oil. Outside, under the open sky, the thermometer stood at about 80°; indoors it cannot have fallen far short of 100°.

For many nights I sat by the King's side, sad at heart now that in truth my old friend was dying; pity for his sufferings for the time effacing the memory of his manifold iniquities, which were indeed as the sands of the seashore for multitude. But none the less the somewhat grim humours of the scene appealed to me irresistibly, and I observed all that passed around me as very quaintly illustrating the characteristics of this strange people.

The King was for the most part unconscious, and from time to time a twitching of all his extremities, followed by a rippling of the muscles under the brown skin, like a gust of wind passing over the surface of a pool, ended in a fit of strong convulsions. Then we, who sat nearest to him, laid violent hands upon him to restrain his struggles and to shampoo his tortured limbs. Between whiles we sat speaking to one another in low tones; but, as there were near a hundred people present, the buzz of conversation made a considerable stir. The younger concubines of the King behaved in a manner which may have pleased a few, but certainly can have edified nobody. While the convulsions held the King, they aided others in shampooing him in a somewhat perfunctory

manner; and, unless I am much mistaken, they made this part of their duty serve as an occasion for touching and pressing the hands of one or another of the young Rajas whose devotion to their dying monarch had ostensibly called them to his bedside. When the fit had passed, they sat a little back, and entered with spirit into what the Malays call the "game of eye-play" with such of the visitors as chanced to take their fancy. And all the time their King and husband lay within a foot or two of them, fighting for his life with rending pants and gasps. Only one of his wives showed any real sympathy with his sufferings, or anxiety to stay his ebbing life: she was his Queen, and her rank and importance both hung upon the length of the King's days.

Those who held themselves to have deserved well of the King, those who had aided him in his evil doings, those who had followed him in good and bad fortune alike, those who had pandered to his many vices, and the survivors of those who had been his teachers when he was young, were all present—longing for an hour of lucidity, when the generosity born of the fear of death might unloose the strings of the royal money-bags and make any one of them a rich man. I could mark the hunger in their eyes, the hatred of one another that filled them, and the boding anxiety lest the King should not recover consciousness in time to serve their purposes.

The medicine-men were in full force, for the European doctors had pronounced the case beyond human skill. The King was suffering from tumour on the brain, they said, and in a day or two at the most his life would be required of him. But among a superstitious people hope is never lost: a fiend causes the ailment, and if he can be routed, all will in the end be well. So the medicine-men pattered charms and exorcisms unceasingly; and when the fits seized the King, the most daring and the most mendacious among them would cry out that he beheld the *Bajang* (the Familiar One) and his horrible spouse the *Lang Suir* (the Weird Kite-Hag) sitting over against the body of their victim. I could see a shudder of fear ripple over the listeners when this cry was raised, and those nearest to the King would loose their hold on him, and draw back suddenly, so that his head fell with a slap on the matted floor.

Every now and again the King would regain consciousness, and at such times he would gurgle out vows never more to do evil, to pray with regularity and precision, to forgo gambling and other pleasant vices, to spend much money in alms, and generally to be a credit to his ancestors and a glory to those who would come after him.

Once he asked faintly for his *guru*, a little shrivelled pilgrim who had taught him in his youth to read the Kuran and to understand a

few of the tenets of his faith. The *guru* came with alacrity, his face wreathed in smiles, while his advance through the squatting crowd was followed by angry, envious glances from scores of eyes. The old man sat down at the head of the mat upon which the King lay, and the silence of eager curiosity fell upon the listening people.

" Majesty, thy servant is here in thy presence," whispered the pilgrim in the King's ear.

The King glanced up at him, with heavy, tired eyes, upon which the film of death was already forming.

" *Guru*," he said in a hoarse, faint voice, " *Guru*, is it thou ? Thou hast ever been a good *guru* to me."

The *guru's* smile widened till his red, betel-stained gash of a mouth extended almost from ear to ear. Then, very slowly and painfully, the King lifted up his hands until they rested upon his breast, and with the fingers of his left he began to draw off a magnificent diamond ring which he wore upon his right. It came easily enough, for the King had lost much flesh during his illness, and presently he held it up before his eyes in the full glare of the lamps. The *guru's* face was a study, as it worked with eagerness and avarice, while he seemed hardly able to keep his hands from clutching at the blazing gem. A sigh of admiration of the stone, and of disgust that it should be wasted upon the *guru*, swept over the crowd who sat about the

King, and for full two minutes the ring twirled and flashed before our eyes, while a dead silence reigned.

Then the King spoke again. "*Guru*," he repeated, "thou hast been a good *guru* to me." Then very, very slowly he replaced the ring upon his finger. "May God reward thee, O *guru*!" he said piously, and, calmly closing his eyes, pretended to fall into a deep sleep.

The master passion of the miser was strong in death, and the *guru's* face wore a very sour look as he shambled back to his seat among the watchers. The little incident seemed to have raised the spirits of everyone present, with the sole exception of the *guru* himself.

On the next night the King again regained consciousness for a space, and once more called for the *guru*. He was now terribly weak, and the hour of death seemed to be drawing very near.

"The Familiar One of Megat Pendia," said an old medicine-man, "is passing strong. He will have his will of the King, and I, even I, am without the power to drive him forth. No man other than Megat Pendia can save the King now; he hath caused this grievous sickness, and he will not stay his hand until the end hath come. Therefore the King will die; and Megat Pendia will go unscathed, for that is the white man's law. *Ya Allah! Ya Tuhan-ku!* All our eyes are alike black, but the fate of each man differeth from the fate of his fellows."

This time, when the *guru* came to sit at the head of the King's mat, his face wore no smile of hope and expectation. He was very glum and sullen, and when the King inquired of him concerning his chances in a future life, he was profoundly depressing.

"Shall I be saved?" asked the King, in that thin, far-away voice which sounded so strangely from his lips.

"God alone knoweth," ejaculated the *guru*, with the air of one who took the most gloomy view of the situation. "All who are saved see the *lam-alif* at the hour of death. Dost thou see it, O King?"

The *lam-alif* is the letter—the wedded consonant and vowel—which forms the first portion of the profession of Muhammadan faith; and the dulled eyes of the King sought the dingy ceiling-cloth above his head in the hope of seeing there the characters which betokened his eternal salvation. At last he said, "*Guru*, I behold the *lam-alif*!"

"Then, O King, thine hour hath come," was the answer.

The King lay staring at the ceiling-cloth with lack-lustre eyes, but with an eager fascination very curious to see. Then his limbs stiffened slightly, his eyes closed, and his jaw fell.

The silence which had held the people during this last scene was shattered to fragments in a moment. "The King is dead! *Ya Allah*, the King is dead!" cried everyone. The women

set up their discordant lamentations. The Queen threw herself upon the mat at the King's side, and screamed shrilly for the life which in passing had shorn her of rank and power. The concubines let down their back hair in as becoming a manner as they could, and made belief to pull it, while their bright eyes flashed love-glances through their waving tresses. The self-seekers, who now saw their last hopes blighted, groaned aloud, and for full five minutes the noise of mourning was indescribable. Then suddenly a voice came from the corpse. "I am not dead yet," it said. The King's eyes opened, his mouth closed, and in a faint whisper he asked for unleavened bread and molasses. They were brought to him, but he could only eat a mouthful, and soon after he again relapsed into a state of unconsciousness, from which it seemed probable that he would never again recover.

At dawn I left him, and returned across the river to my house. I took a bath, and, as it chanced to be a holiday, wherefore no office required my presence, I thought that I would go and look for a snipe before turning in. My way led up the right bank of the river, through the long straggling village in which Megat Pendia dwelt. As I passed through the fruit groves in the cool freshness of the early morning, the strong contrast to the stuffy, squalid place in which I had spent the night made it difficult to realise that the two scenes could be part

and portion of the same land. The trees and shrubs and all the masses of greenery about me were drenched with dew, which glistened and shone in the bright sunlight; the chorus of the birds, all joining together in their splendid morning song, the purest music ever heard, fell gratefully on my ears; a pack of monkeys were whooping and barking in the jungles across the river. Everything was cool and pure and fragrant, and all the world seemed newly washed and clean. I revelled in the beauty of the scene, and tried to persuade myself that the sordid death-bed of the King, with all the greed and lasciviousness which had made it hideous to witness, was but an evil dream that had come to me during the dreary night-watches.

Presently I met a Malay hurrying down the path in the direction from which I had come. "Whither away?" I asked; for this question is a cordial greeting among Malays.

"I go to summon the washers of the dead," said the man, halting to speak to me.

"Who is dead?" I asked.

"My father, Megat Pendia," replied the man. "He died an hour ago."

"What ailed him?" I asked.

"I know not; but he was a very old man. He died from old age, I fancy."

I did not go on to the snipe-grounds; but instead I turned back to the station, and sent a doctor to examine Megat Pendia's body, for I feared that he might have met with foul play.

In due course I received the doctor's report, and his certificate left no doubt that death had been due to natural causes.

In the afternoon I crossed the river to see how it fared with the King. At the gate of his compound I met one of his people. "The King is better," said the man. "Megat Pendia died this morning, and the Familiar One hath departed."

The room in which the King had lain stretched during his illness was empty now, save for four or five women who ministered to him. I had been warned that I should find him better, but I was not prepared for an almost complete recovery. The King was sitting on the long rattan chair, as of old, eating unleavened bread and molasses ravenously. His concubines, very demure and sober, with their modest eyes pinned to the floor-mats, squatted around him, tending him with extreme assiduity. He said that he was weak and very hungry, but otherwise quite well.

"I am told that Megat Pendia died when the day was dawning," he said significantly. "It was at that hour that the Evil One left me."

The King lived to break all his pious vows, and died a couple of years later with a heavy load of new crimes to bear before the Judgment Seat. But at that time I was far away on the east coast of the Peninsula, and I know not whether the *lam-alif* came to comfort his last moments with an assurance of certain salvation.

The European doctors explained that the growth of the tumour on the King's brain had been suddenly arrested, and the case was quoted as one of unparalleled interest. But the Malays say that the King went near to lose his life at the hands of Megat Pendia's Familiar, and that the timely death of its owner alone prevented the Evil One from completing its work of destruction.

## V

## "THE LEGION OF STRANGERS"

I AM not personally responsible for the above rendering into English of the name of a famous French corps—*La Légion Étrangère*—which is the one unquestionably efficient piece of machinery at the disposal of that ubiquitous *Administration*, whereof the feverish desire to "govern" makes existence almost impossible to the unofficial population of Indo-China.

The phrase belongs to my friend Gunner Stevenson of the Royal Regiment of Artillery; and as I cannot attempt to reproduce the rest of his story in his own words, I think that it is only fair to give it a title in which I can quote him literally. He told me the tale of his experiences as I lay sick on my cot in the hospital in an Eastern city, while he clawed my cigarette-papers to tatters in his large, unaccustomed fingers. He was a nice-looking young fellow, smart, alert, and upstanding in his khaki uniform; and since he had eyes that could see, and a mind capable of assimilating his impressions, he had much to say that was worth hearing.

In the beginning, he explained, he had been a

fool. The life of the British soldier in a garrison town of the tropics is dull to a degree that cannot adequately be expressed in set terms. Réveillé at five, parade while the short hours of coolness last, breakfast, orderly-room later for the unfortunate; and then the long, empty, panting day, during which men can only lie on their cots, kicking their heels and cursing their luck, or bickering aimlessly. Meals and a few uninteresting inspections and fatigues supply the infrequent breaks in the interminable monotony. The white man's enemy, the sun, holds the men close prisoners until the afternoon brings coolness; for soldiers are expensive, and their officers cannot risk allowing them to take their chance of heat-apoplexy with Europeans of the common run.

But even the two hours before the sun goes out, with the suddenness of an extinguished candle, bring but poor relief from the appalling boredom of the soldier's life. He may put on his forage-cap and walk down to the bazaar, or he may play cricket or football, but the time for recreation is all too short; and soon after 10 p.m. the bugle sounds "Lights out," and the dreary day ends, to be followed by another which is its exact image. Try in imagination to spend a year or two composed wholly of days such as this, and you will begin to understand why it is that the more intelligent and active-minded of our soldiers in the East are occasionally possessed by a devil of madness, which drives

them to perpetrate apparently inexplicable follies.

Gunner Stevenson endured barrack life for some two years; then, as he himself described it, he acted like a fool. He had late leave one night, at a period when his simmering mental irritation had nearly reached boiling-point; and in a bar in the town he forgathered with three Scotch engineers from steam-tramps then lying in the roads. These men, who spent most of their lives in the stokehold of Chinese-owned crafts—about as seaworthy as a sieve and as evil-smelling as a sago-factory—sweating at every pore, between grilling climate and blazing furnaces, saw fit to pity and deride the soldier on account of the misery of his lot. In unendurable fashion they contrasted his servitude with their freedom—save the mark! They chaffed him about the "leave" he was forced to ask, ere he could even spend an evening in a tavern of the town. They affected to whistle to him, that he might come to heel, declaring roundly that dogs had more liberty from their masters than a private is allowed by his officers. Ordinarily Gunner Stevenson would have contented himself with trying to break their bones; but in his then state of mind the taunts rang true, and the bitterness of things ate into his spirit. He fell to reciting the "Devil's Catechism," cursing the British Army, from the Commander-in-Chief to the last and least of the drummer-boys, and wound up by vaingloriously announcing

his utter willingness to fly in the face of Providence and the *King's Regulations*. The slow Scotsmen laughed in their grimy beards, and dared him to prove that he was really " game "; whereupon Gunner Stevenson, after " spoiling the faces " of two of them, and borrowing a soiled suit of clothes from the third, tramped down to the docks and stowed himself away on board a ship bound for the French Colonies.

He awoke next morning with a sore head, a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach, and an unshakable conviction that he was a fool such as is seldom seen. Also he counted ruefully the few dollars that he possessed, and thereafter gave himself up to despair and the agonies of sea-sickness.

The ship reached Saigon, and Stevenson, gaunt and miserable, with a rudimentary beard sprouting on his chin, sneaked ashore unobserved. In twenty-four hours from the time of his landing, necessity, combined with a lack of imagination, had driven him to the nearest French recruiting office, where he was promptly enrolled in the corps of which he ever afterwards spoke as " The Legion of Strangers." He had quitted the British Army —leaving behind him a spotless defaulter-sheet and prospects of early promotion to non-commissioned rank—because the life of a soldier had proved too irksome in its grinding monotony, and because for a moment or two Discipline had appeared to him as a Spectre of Tyranny: yet in less than a week he had of his own

motion entered himself as a recruit in a regiment which offered scant promise of a career, and is ruled by its officers with an iron hand.

*La Légion Étrangère*, as everybody knows, is composed of men of all races of white folk, and of every degree of ruffianism and villainy. Speaking generally, the soldiers in its ranks are the sweepings of the Continental races, the " casters " and loafers whom Fate has left stranded in the inhospitable ports of Eastern Asia or of Northern or Western Africa. The Legion serves only abroad ; it acts as the police, judge, jury, and executioner in the lawless *Hinterlands* of the French Colonies. Its members never earn or obtain leave of absence, nor are they transferable to other corps. Nominally, discharge can be won at the end of ten years' continuous duty, but few live to enjoy their freedom — vile climates and the native folk, whom the French designate collectively as " pirates," using up the Legionaries with a startling rapidity. Cosmopolitan in character, composed of desperate and " broken " men, engaged constantly in unrecorded struggles with the enemies of France,—which her colonial administration has such an unhappy knack of creating,—*La Légion Étrangère* bears a sinister reputation ; but this is altogether eclipsed by that boasted by the officers who lead it. They are popularly supposed to be a pack of unlicked devils, the outcasts of society, erstwhile gentlemen who " have gone under," men whom ill-

fortune has embittered, whom vice has ruined and made savage—Frenchmen who desire no longer to see France or to tread the boulevards of Paris.

Yet Gunner Stevenson, who is a broad-minded person, had a good word to say for his comrades of the Legion. His charity was not large enough to include the Italians or the Levantines, but he pronounced the Swedes, Danes, Germans, Belgians, and Frenchmen to be good fellows, who left a man in peace when once he had given proof of his ability to stand up for himself. The officers, though they came down upon defaulters "like a cart-load of bricks," struck him as fine soldiers, dashing leaders, and very just in their dealings with the men. The promptness of their drumhead courts-martial, and the *sang-froid* with which they ordered captured "pirates" out for instant execution in big batches, appealed forcibly to his sense of the eternal fitness of things; and in other matters, of which he was perhaps a sounder judge, his criticisms reflected badly on the British Army. For instance, he was much struck by the marching powers of the corps, which he attributed in a great measure to the superior method of packing and disposing of the soldier's kit; for he told me that the boots served out were very poor things compared with the regulation "ammunition-boot" used in our Service. He had much more to say that was worth noting, but this is not the place in which to enlarge upon his

opinion concerning things technical. Instead, I must pass on to the description of the one big sensation experienced by him during the space that he served with " The Legion of Strangers."

This did not arise from the battles in which he took his share; for the " pirates " of the Tongking Hinterland, he said, used their rifles with little skill. These rifles, it should be mentioned, were mostly of Birmingham manufacture, being supplied by that trade which manages to sneak into every corner where the Flag is not. Most fights resolved themselves into a scattering squabble of musketry spluttering over ten square miles of boulder-strewn hills; and it was only when a small detachment of the Legionaries lost their way and fell into the hands of the enemy that much harm came to them. On such occasions unspeakable things were done to the prisoners; but Gunner Stevenson, fortunately for himself, never met with such a disaster as this. Therefore the affair which chiefly impressed itself upon his memory was a private quarrel, which took a course altogether unlike anything to which his previous experience as a British soldier had accustomed him.

He had joined the Legion a few weeks prior to the outbreak of the war in South Africa, and some months elapsed before news of that event trickled through from the coast to the wilderness in which he was serving. It came accompanied by the rumour of appalling British disasters, jubilantly magnified and distorted by

the press of Indo-China,—which does not love the English, — and it created a tremendous excitement among Stevenson's comrades.

From the first, the new recruit had found that he was doomed to a life of great loneliness. He was the only Englishman in the ranks ; he knew no French, though he contrived to pick up enough to carry him along ; and the men were divided into a number of cliques. The Italians and the Levantine "scum"—I quote Gunner Stevenson once more—herded together, and were despised by their fellows because they were believed to be folk of little courage. The Swedes and Danes associated almost exclusively with the Germans ; the Frenchmen, who counted themselves the *élite* of the nondescript mob, messed together, and gave most foreigners the cold shoulder.

Stevenson, who, true to his birth, had been brought up to believe himself worth a dozen foreigners, naturally claimed a place among the crack section of the corps, and attached himself to the Frenchmen, by whom, he said, he was treated with much kindness. When the word telling of war with the Boers reached the camp, however, his position became very difficult. All his comrades, he discovered, were fierce partisans of the Dutchmen, and cherished an instinctive hatred of England. At that time, all the world over, men thought and talked of little save the war ; wherefore Gunner Stevenson found his hand against all men and all men's

hands against him, and was forced to listen to a great deal that was calculated to make an Englishman wince. He could not fight the whole regiment — the foreign tongue fettered him, and rendered him wholly inarticulate in argument ; he could only curse and blaspheme— in a language whose oaths brought no real consolation to his conservative British soul—and heartily wish himself back again in the great hot barrack-room, the monotony of which had driven him once to madness.

His own mess-mates, the Frenchmen, seem to have shown something like courtesy to the stranger ; and though they could not entirely repress their triumph at British mishaps, they did their best to refrain from being brutally offensive to the individual Britisher. We islanders are prone to believe that love of fair play is a virtue peculiarly our own, but the innate courtesy of the French may often perhaps bring about the same results as the Englishman's cult of abstract justice. Anyhow, Gunner Stevenson, after living cheek by jowl during a particularly trying time with some of the worst blackguards of France, was reduced to a condition of gasping wonder at the forbearance which they showed him, and the tact displayed by the roughest of them, even when men's passions were stirred to an unusual intensity.

That trouble must come sooner or later, since the war had given so adverse a turn to his cir-

cumstances, Stevenson saw clearly; and the fact oppressed him, for he recognised his utter ignorance of foreign manners and customs, and knew not at all what form the trouble might assume.

One day, however, the long-expected storm burst. A huge, hulking German, the recognised bully and cock of his mess, sauntered into the hut occupied by Stevenson and the Frenchmen. He put out a vast red hand and knocked the dominoes, which were standing in front of the Englishman, on to the ground, accompanying the action by some luridly unprintable remarks concerning the origin, morals, and appearance of the British nation as a whole, and of Stevenson, its solitary representative in "The Legion of Strangers."

The assault was so unprovoked and so direct that the Englishman lost his temper in a moment, and before he had time to think or to calculate the consequences, had flown at the German, yelling to him "to put his hands up," and was knocking him endways with a pair of honest English fists, striking out straight from his shoulders.

The German was fleshy, and the blows raised gratifying bruises and lumps all over his face; and Stevenson, the joy of battle dancing within him, found to his delight that he could pummel the giant where and how he chose, since the fellow had not a notion of the use to which fists can be put. His enjoyment was complete, but

it was of short duration. A great hubbub arose, and half the occupants of the hut threw themselves on the combatants, and yelled shrill reproof at Stevenson for his murderous conduct. His best friends among the Frenchmen were apparently the most shocked. They loudly deplored the savage brutality of his behaviour; while the German, looking dazed and surprised, as though he had knocked up against a hidden volcano, was led off to his own mess by a band of protesting sympathisers.

The attitude manifested by public opinion was a sore puzzle to Stevenson. The man had offended him of set purpose, and had been badly thrashed for his pains. Surely that was logical cause and effect. Then, wherefore was all this pother raised even by the most friendly of the Frenchmen? The thing was inexplicable. He had not originated the quarrel, but when it had been thrust upon him, he had stood up for himself, and had speedily settled it once for all by licking the offensive German. The incident was closed, satisfactorily, creditably to himself, and, as he believed, finally.

This, however, was not the view taken by his comrades. Stevenson's British code of honour was completely satisfied, but not so that cherished by *La Légion Étrangère*. According to the Legionaries, the German had been within his rights in wantonly inflicting an insult upon the Englishman, and the latter had been justified in answering it with a blow. His misdemeanour

lay in the fact that he had not contented himself with the singular number. To beat a man heartily and repeatedly with the naked fists was the act of a savage, a piece of barbarism which was utterly inexcusable. Such things were not permitted to happen among gentlemen. This and more also was explained to Stevenson, who scratched his head and strained his understanding, trying vainly to catch a single ray of intelligence through all this murky unreason.

"*Mais j'ai écrase le coquin*," he said again and again in his bewilderment. "*Alors c'est fini, n'est ce pas?*" But the suggestion was received with horrified denials. The incident was very far indeed from being finished, it was barely begun. It had obviously been the desire of the German to provoke a challenge. The preliminaries, although Stevenson had sadly overacted his part in them, were now complete, and it only remained to arrange a duel decently and in order.

But this view of the situation did not at all commend itself to Gunner Stevenson. He was ready enough to stand up to an enemy with the weapons God had given him, to administer or take a thrashing, and to shake hands heartily when all was over; but to fight a duel to the death was quite another business, and one, moreover, for which he was not in the least prepared. Having vanquished the flabby German with quite ridiculous ease, Stevenson felt that he now bore him no malice, and could afford to regard him with a friendly and

half-contemptuous disdain. He had not the slightest desire to kill him: he was even less anxious to be killed by him. The whole affair was being lifted on to a plane of tragedy that was appalling. Also, the moral aspect of the matter troubled him. If he were killed in the very act of trying to murder a man against whom he had now no spite, what would be his ultimate destination? The name of hell had often been on the lips of himself and his fellows in the British barrack-room, but the thing itself had never before appealed to him as a place into which he might unexpectedly step in the course of a few hours' time.

He seized his helmet, and hurriedly left the tent. He must think the difficult problem out before he gave a final answer to his comrades; wherefore he took his way alone to a neighbouring hillock, and sat himself down to smoke and ponder. He was very far from happy. All manner of things which had not recurred to his memory for years came crowding now into his mind. He thought of the sheltered village far away in the trim West Country—that peaceful place of grassy hills, wooded combes, and deep red lanes full of a fragrant coolness, where he had lived as a child; of the little church standing in the infinitely quiet God's acre; of the mother at whose knee he had learned the religion that had been so long neglected and forgotten, but was now unexpectedly obtruding itself upon him. He was more than half ashamed of himself for

dwelling on these things, was inclined to blush for them as weaknesses; but they rose up, one by one, to haunt him and to influence his decision.

He must fight: that was certain—for if he refused, his life would not be worth living. He would fight, but he would not *kill*. If he were to go before the Judgment Seat, it should be with hands clean of blood. This resolution shaped itself unbidden, and smote him with surprise as being altogether out of keeping with his preconceived notion of himself. He had fancied that he was hardened and reckless; that his nerve was equal to most things; that he was eminently capable of taking care of himself; and that he was not one likely to endanger his safety for the sake of a mere scruple. Yet now that he was brought face to face with something wholly unfamiliar and repellent to his instincts, he found himself calmly accepting what he believed to be a death-sentence, rather than take the life of a man who was in no way bound to him. He longed to sneak out of the duel, but pride of race made this impossible; he would very willingly have stifled the voice of his so suddenly awakened conscience, but to do this he was powerless: therefore, sorely against the grain, and feeling particularly sorry for himself, Gunner Stevenson knocked the ashes out of his pipe and walked back to the camp.

A duel between men of *La Légion Étrangère* is a solemn rite, the due performance of which is

hedged about by much formality and ritual. There is no need for concealment, for it has the full approval of the authorities, and is said to have the effect of making fighting among the Legionaries very unusual. The non-commissioned officer responsible for the section of the challenger goes to his Company's officer and makes elaborate report. He next begs for an order to draw two rounds of ball cartridge out of store, and asks leave for his men to be excused parade on the following morning, together with their seconds and a few others officially connected with the business in hand. All this was done on behalf of the burly German, for a Court of Honour (an anomalous thing, by the way, to find itself established in " The Legion of Strangers ") had decided that the mauling to which that worthy had been subjected at the hands of the Englishman gave him the rights of the aggrieved party in the dispute.

In the chill of the early morning, therefore, Gunner Stevenson found himself standing, rifle in hand, thirty paces distant from his adversary, with half a dozen men of the Legion looking on from a spot close at hand, but well out of the line of fire. There was a dank white mist swirling in slow eddies out of the hollows, but the light was fairly good, and Stevenson could plainly see every feature of the big German's face. It was horribly swollen and discoloured, and one eye, which was well-nigh obliterated, glinted wickedly behind folds of purple flesh.

Stevenson, who had spent a miserable night in anticipation of the coming ordeal, was quite horribly afraid, and the chill of the morning falling on his already oppressed spirit froze him into a kind of cold despair. The matter, now that it had come to the point, seemed curiously prosaic and trivial; he had great difficulty in realising that he was himself intimately connected with it; somehow he felt much of the aloofness of a mere spectator, unthrilled by excitement, though all the while he was conscious of the fact that he was in the grip of a mortal fear.

His perceptions were sharpened wonderfully. Every object within view was seen with a distinctness of detail which was abnormal, and each one of them seemed to possess a peculiar and insistent interest for him. He noted every stain on the canvas fatigue-kit of his enemy, and caught himself wondering how and by what each of them had been caused; he spied a mole with coarse hairs sprouting from it on the man's left cheek, and marvelled that the fellow did not pluck them out, instead of leaving such unsightly things to offend the eye; and then he noticed, this time with a shock of astonishment, that the German's hands were shaking. Till that moment Stevenson, inconsequently enough, had felt convinced that he alone was afraid; now it occurred to him suddenly that his adversary was in no better case. The discovery elated him in an extra-

ordinary fashion. At once he cocked his head, threw back his shoulders, and tried to smile. Regarded as a smile, it was a deplorable failure, for the muscles of his face were very stiff in their sockets; but in the circumstances it was not discreditable, and it obviously discomposed the German.

" *Êtes-vous prêts?* " rasped out the voice of the non-commissioned officer. Stevenson, made aware suddenly of the intense preoccupation in which he had been sunk, started violently, nearly dropping his rifle, as he mumbled an unintelligible assent. The German jerked a sound out of himself, half pant, half grunt.

" *Un!* " cried the voice again. The men raised their rifles to their shoulders, and Stevenson found himself instinctively cuddling his chin into the stock in search of an easy position.

" *Deux!* " He glanced along the dully glinting barrel, and saw at an enormous distance,—so it seemed,—a shining silver ring suspended in mid-air, encircling a spot of inky blackness. The ring danced this way and that, up and down and from side to side, in a manner which made Stevenson dizzy to watch. The big bruised face of the German, contorted by spasms, leered above it with wide-open jaw, as though he were trying to catch that circle of metal in his teeth.

" *Trois!* " What immense pauses occurred between each word! The ring was revolving madly now, whirling round and round and

shooting forth long rays of light of all the colours of the prism; and framed in that whirling aureola, the face of the German was seen monstrous and grimacing, and suddenly grey beneath the purple patches of bruise. Stevenson, in a condition bordering on a hypnotic trance, kept his eye fixed upon that wheel of blazing flames—the core of which was the tiny silver circle—and almost lost the sense of his own identity. He seemed to be floating in space, drawn irresistibly toward that point of dazzling light; while something throbbed and pulsed, like the engine of a motor-car, filling the world with a great tumult. It was the sound of his own heart-beats that deafened him.

"*Feu!*"

At last the long torture was ended, the supreme moment had come. Yet for an instant nothing happened. Then the heavens rocked to the roar of a mighty detonation. Stevenson heard something scream in his ear, and felt a cold breath upon his cheek. He had shut his eyes, and let his finger fall from the trigger. Now he opened them, and dropped his rifle to the ready. He looked for the German, and for the minute failed to find him. The silver ring with its circle of gyrating flames had vanished. A fat, ungainly figure was kneeling on the ground, shouting for mercy, its useless rifle thrown aside.

Then at last Stevenson arrived at an understanding of what had happened. The German

had fired and had missed his aim. He was now completely at the mercy of the Englishman. For the life of him, Stevenson, his calm and his self-confidence miraculously restored, could not forbear to raise his rifle, and take deliberate aim at the squirming wretch before him. But the agony which he caused made him convict himself of brutality ; he dropped his rifle to the carry, opened the breech, and jerked the loaded cartridge on to the grass at his feet.

" And that was the end of my duel with the German in 'The Legion of Strangers,' sir," he said to me. " And though we were neither of us hurt, I had had more than I wanted. I deserted soon after, and gave myself up to my old Battery; and my major treated me real well, so I'm like to get my stripes before long You take it from me, sir, there are worse places than a barrack-room of the British Army. I don't hold with having too much truck with foreigners; a man don't know where to have 'em—not after what I gone through in 'The Legion of Strangers.' A man don't know where to have 'em."

## VI

# MIR MALUK, SEPOY

"CUR to the bone!" we said; and surely the facts warranted that pitiless verdict. The weakness of the willing tool; the meanness of the sneaking mercenary; cowardice, cruelty, folly, ineptitude; the hopeless lack of nerve at the critical moment which vitiates the plans laid by larger brains; the brutality of the slayer in cold blood of the utterly defenceless—all these and more were here combined. What further need for indictment? "Cur to the bone!" we said, secure in the sanity of our judgment of this human animal. "Here at last we have that hideous thing, which some psychologists pronounce to be non-existent—the man who is wholly bad."

But let the story tell itself, and be the reader judge between us who condemned him and the Cur on whose head we poured out the vials of our bitterest contempt.

The long, low barrack-room, with its walls of weather-boarding and its thatched roof supported by rough rafters, was hushed to the

heavy silence that came upon it only when the night-time was far advanced. The narrow aisle which split it in twain was empty; the string bedsteads, jutting out from the walls, were filled, each with its slumbering occupant. A hurricane-lamp suspended from the ceiling glared sullenly through its smoke-blackened glass. In the gloom the forms of the sleeping Punjaubi soldiers could be discerned dimly—some mere shapeless objects huddled beneath blankets of a dull red colour; some lying on their backs, with limbs flung wide, and mouths gaping above black beards; others with jaws bound about by linen wrappers like corpses laid out for burial; others again snuggling on their sides curled up like dogs; and a few lying prostrate, their faces half hidden in their folded arms, "sleeping as the devils sleep." Now and again a faint snore would break upon the stillness, or a dreamer would mumble a fragment of unravelled speech; but for the rest, the silence, which seemed to be one with the thick, hot atmosphere, filled the place as with a vapour of oppression.

Suddenly a shadowy figure arose below the lamp, and the flame dropped to a spark, quivered and leaped, then died down, leaving the room in darkness. Immediately a shot rang out, fierce, startling, crashing in upon the dreams of near a hundred men, and losing itself in a grumble of echoes ere a single sleeper had been shocked into complete consciousness. A rustle of sound

followed, made audible by contrast with the rude explosion of an instant earlier—a sound as of limbs that stretched and stiffened slowly in the last movements of their appointed course. There was a shuffle, too, of bare feet upon the floor; and then, with wild hubbub, the barrack-room awoke. Sikhs and Punjaubi Muhammadans—and the barrack-room housed men of both races—are alike dowered with a genius for noise. Big, burly, bearded fellows—from them, if from any of the sons of Adam, one would look for the rough, deep bass of the fighter ; doers of deeds, not thinkers of thoughts, they should be curt folk of few words. Instead, to them have been given voices raucous and shrill, falsetto voices that scream and blare in strange discords, the loquacity of a mob of hornbills, and tones that cannot be modulated. The barrack-room was now a very Babel of rude noise, as the men tumbled out of their cots and crowded in a scrambling, roaring pack, those in front struggling to maintain their distance from the Thing upon the bed which had been the regimental sergeant-major, and from the rifle upon the floor which had robbed him of his strenuous life. Then a bugle blared the "Fall in," and the men, following the instinct of obedience, lined up on the narrow strip of parade-ground under the still, pure light of the Bornean moon.

Below them, as they stood upon the bluff, the waters of Sandakan Bay lay glinting like a shield of steel, flecked here and there by black

patches of shadow, which were tethered ships and junks; on the right, below them still, the native town blinked sleepy, bloodshot eyes at them from the huddle of houses made formless by the half-darkness; behind them, on the jungle-covered hills, lights shone placidly from the bungalows of the European quarter. The faces of the men showed pale under the moon, their eyes bright with excitement and fear. The Subadar, in his white bedclothes, with his bushy beard trained over the tops of his ears and bound by a linen bandage, passed up and down the line, reading the roll-call. The men answered to their names in voices that thrilled the ear—unnatural voices, tremulous, discordant, vibrating, and uncontrolled. No man was missing from that long list.

"O Narain Singh!" cried the Subadar. "Get thee to the central guard and bid the men stand to their arms!"

A Sikh in flowing white draperies leaped out of the ranks, and began to run swiftly down the hill towards the town. A second shadowy form broke away from the line of silent men and plunged into the shadows after him.

"Who is that?" cried the Subadar sharply. "Come back! One man is enough." But there was no reply; only in the distance sounded the patter of bare feet as Narain Singh and his unknown comrade sped upon their way.

Naarin Singh, slackening his pace when he heard footfalls in his rear, was nearly knocked

over by the impetuous onrush of the unknown; and slewing his head over his shoulder as he rapped out a blasphemy, he recognised Mir Maluk, a young Muhammadan of the corps. The face of the new-comer—keen, handsome, cleanly cut, as are so many of the faces of his people—was ashen grey, the eyes blazing, the mouth gasping horribly.

"Let us run!" he panted. "Let us run, run, run!"

"Run, then, O Brother," cried Narain Singh; but he went craftily, neither allowing the other to outstrip him, nor yet to fall behind.

The murdered sergeant-major had been a Muhammadan, and Narain Singh knew that if there had been any conspiracy afoot among the Sikhs to work him an ill, the secret, though staunchly kept, would have been widely known. Many of the races of India have a peculiar talent for this sort of intrigue, and the most dangerous plans can with safety be divulged to half a countryside without risking betrayal. Narain Singh argued that he would surely have been one of the first to know of the plottings of his own caste-mates, for he flattered himself that he was eminently a person worthy of trust; wherefore it was evident to him that the sergeant-major had been removed, not by Sikhs, but by some of his own co-religionists. Now it is at once the business and the joy of every member of a mixed Sikh and Muhammadan force to show up the misdeeds of the opposing creed; wherefore

Narain Singh, who had no objection on principle to cold-blooded murder, ran cunningly, and kept his eyes skinned to watch the movements of Mir Maluk.

Across the empty market-place the two men sped, the lean curs of the town barking and snapping at their heels. From the houses on their left came sounds of men disturbed, and the slow cackle of poultry unwilling to awake. Presently the lights of the guard-house showed a couple of hundred yards ahead, playing hide-and-seek behind the palm trees as the men ran forward. As they entered the compound Mir Maluk fell ever so little to the rear, and dropped in the long grass which fringed the pathway. Narain Singh halted in mid-stride, and with a leap like a wild cat was upon him. The young Muhammadan was rubbing the palms of his hands hurriedly against the coarse stems of the *lalang* grass, while his eyes darted quick, fearful glances from side to side.

"I fouled them falling from the barrack-room in my haste," he gasped in explanation, as Narain Singh seized him roughly by the shoulder; and together the men rose and ran forward.

At the guard-house Narain Singh made his report to the sergeant.

"And this one followed me unasked, O Sergeant-ji!" he said.

The sergeant turned scowling upon Mir Maluk. "Wherefore didst thou quit the ranks?" he asked.

"It was an order," panted the youngster, winded by his long run. "An order of the Subadar Sahib."

That was his second lie, and the third false move which he had made within the hour. Before dawn Mir Maluk was lodged in the lock-up, securely hidden from sympathetic Muhammadan eyes by a guard of Sikhs, who, exercising the right of the hereditary enemy of his people, mocked him unmercifully, pointing to the gyves upon his wrists, and hailing him as a proselyte, since the iron bangle, though of a different pattern, is the distinctive badge of the Lion caste. Close at hand, certain leading and now exceedingly wrathful Muhammadans sate in secret conclave, cursing Mir Maluk for a sorry bungler, and disputing venomously as to who should bear the blame for having selected so inefficient a tool.

So far the incident, though ugly, was commonplace enough. The men of the irregular forces in this part of the world have a nasty habit of using up their native officers with a rather prodigal extravagance. When a man stops promotion by unseemly longevity, when he is a stickler for discipline, when he declines to wink at broken rules, when he makes favourites, or puts his spite upon some clumsy recruit who has influential relatives among the non-commissioned officers, he runs considerable risk of dying very suddenly. Most native officers do one or more of these things; can we wonder, therefore,

that the days of some of them are not suffered to be long in the land? But if one such murder be successful, and the perpetrator escape detection, the thing is likely to assume an epidemic form; so at such times the white men in charge of the force grow lean with care, and their faces become prematurely wrinkled by watchfulness and the gnawings of perpetual suspicion.

After the death of the sergeant-major there followed a month of plottings and schemings. Those concerned to save Mir Maluk's neck were busy coaching false witnesses; intimidating the few—the very few—who had a hankering after truth; trying to discover the names and the keys to the consciences of probable jurymen; and employing all the wiles and expedients known to the natives of India for the conversion of the Justice of the English into the laughing-stock of the East.

So far as Mir Maluk himself was concerned, however, the prosecution had an unusually easy time of it. Of course he denied the deed stoutly; of course the rifle used belonged to a Sikh; of course the cartridge had been stolen from the pouch of a perfectly innocent man; but the tool chosen to do the killing had proved himself extraordinarily maladroit, and all the careful planning of wiser heads had been thrown away upon him. He had lost his nerve at the critical moment—as soon as the actual shot had been fired. He had lacked the presence of mind, the courage, to stand still in the ranks, while the

spirit of him was rowelled by the spur of unwonted emotions. He had made himself conspicuous at the instant when all depended upon observation overlooking him, passing him by. Perhaps his self-control had been filched from him by the *splash* of that something wherewith his hands were reddened ; for the explosion had snapped the tension of his overwrought mind, and, dropping his smoking rifle, he had stumbled blindly, saving himself from falling by his outstretched palms, which had come into contact with the awful Thing that still lay upon the sergeant-major's *charpoy*. That unlooked-for accident had unstrung him, had shaken him with a masterless fear. It was as though the dead man had drawn him to himself in a dreadful embrace, and had set his mark upon him, so that the murder might not pass unavenged. Thereafter, Mir Maluk had been possessed by a single idea, a single desire—the desire to escape, to get away, no matter whither, so be it were far from the grim form upon the string bedstead. In that moment he had betrayed himself hopelessly ; and when the verdict of *Guilty* was returned, all knew that the finding was just.

Seated alone in his cell, whither he had been brought straight from the court-house, Mir Maluk had ample leisure to devote to thought, and many things wherewith to occupy his mind. Death—inevitable, violent, disgraceful death—stared him in the eyes. The very Sikhs who stood guard over him had ceased to mock him,

for even to their narrow imaginations his was an impressive figure as he stood, poised unsteadily, on the brink of an open grave. Of a sudden the love of life took hold of Mir Maluk with a force that he never before had known. Mere existence, the drawing of breath, the sight of God's sunlight and sky,—although he saw them only through the barred window of a cell,—was unspeakably sweet. He was conscious of the rioting of the young blood within his veins, of the joy of youth, of the glow of health, of the triumph of physical strength, of the immense vitality that was his ; and every one of these things, which in the past he had realised not at all, assumed all at once an extraordinary value.

And as his appreciation of this truth gripped him more and more insistently, the bitterness of the death that awaited him became hourly more bitter. It was not that the thought of the physical pang preyed upon him or shook his nerve. The innate stoicism of his breed here stood him in good stead. He had no fear of death itself, no dread of the pains that would accompany his passage from time into eternity. He knew that when the hour came he would tread unfalteringly the path that leads to the scaffold ; that he would stand upon that awful platform, awaiting the drawing of the bolt that would launch him into the unknown, without a physical tremor ; that he would die, as all the men of his race are wont to die, with calmness and with dignity. This was not the trouble that beset

him. The bitterness lay in the loss of all the animal joys of which death would rob him. Life—he knew it now—was good, very good. A dull rage seized him at the mere thought of losing it. The life that lay beyond the grave had no attractions for him. He had no fear of it, he was tortured by no anxieties as to his eternal welfare, repentance did not touch him, remorse had not come to him, he did not regret the coward's deed which he had wrought : only a wild longing to live was upon him—to live, not in some dim spirit-world, but here on earth, the life of his fellow-men, the life the love of which had been suddenly revealed to him.

He pondered these things in his heart, and ever, as the desire of living gained in force and in intensity, a furious anger against the men who had instigated his action glowed with a fiercer flame. So it was all over, and this was the sorry end ! Until the very last he had cuddled unreasoning hope to his breast. Had not the men who had wrought his undoing told him repeatedly that they would look to it that his deed should escape detection ? He, poor fool, had had blind faith in their skill and cunning, and his faith had brought him to this. He reviewed in memory the stolen meetings with the leading Muhammadans of the corps to which he had been bidden. He remembered the pride which had been his that such men should admit him to their confidence. They had spoken soft things in his ears concerning his valour, and that of the

fighting breed from which he was sprung. He had believed their admiration genuine. The love of slaying for its own sake—of slaying a man—which is in the blood of many of the warlike tribesmen of Asia, had spurred him on to kill the sergeant-major. The act had been represented to him as something heroic—the act of ridding his fellows of a tyrant whom none dared oppose. It had never occurred to him at the time that the men who praised his spirit, and egged him on to murder, were bending him to their will, making him a tool for the performance of that which they were loth to do for themselves. They had offered him money, it was true, and information had been conveyed to him in prison that the price of his crime had been remitted to his aged father in the Punjaub. But he knew in his heart that it had not been a money-lure, but the desire to perform some doughty deed that had led him on to slay.

The fighting blood in him stirred anew as he meditated upon his folly and his fellows' treachery. He saw all things clearly at last—his own simplicity and vanity, upon which the others had played so cunningly; the cowardice of these careful plotters, who had been so mindful of their personal safety; and the ugliness of the crime itself—this murder of a sleeping man—which had brought with it no thrill of victory, and was punishable with a dog's death. Vainly he pictured what might have been. He saw himself attacking the enemy of his brethren

fearlessly, man to man, in broad daylight, in the face of all his world. That had been a deed worth the doing. Had he lost his life then, grappling with his enemy, with the passion of battle afire within him, he had not grudged it. But now, branded for a coward, he was to be led forth to ignominious death, dishonoured of all—he who from the depths of his soul had longed and hungered for honour.

And the more he dwelt upon the past, and the more the love of life was quickened in him, the more his hatred against the men who had duped him became inflamed; and the more the fighting instinct of his people asserted itself, the more eagerly he desired to die, if die he must, dealing destruction to all about him, that as many as might be should share his ruin and feel the bitterness of his despair.

"Cur to the bone!" we said. "This only was lacking, that, having done a coward's deed in cowardly wise, having failed of that measure of self-control that might have blinded detection, and having taken blood-money for his villainy, he should now repent him of his bargain and seek to purchase his own life at the price of those of his accomplices."

But Mir Maluk did not plead for life. He made no stipulations of any kind concerning himself; only he expressed himself anxious to make complete confession. And since it was important in the interests of the corps that the guilty should not escape unpunished,

arrangements were promptly made for the taking down of that confession formally in the presence of witnesses. "Cowardly brute, of course." What other verdict could we pass upon him? But though the officers of the corps shared our contempt for the creature, they breathed more freely because Mir Maluk was about to make "a clean breast of it."

All these things happened in the little town of Sandakan, in North Borneo, in the year of grace 1900, and it was in the gaol of that place that Mir Maluk lay in captivity. Here on a certain afternoon a little court assembled for the purpose of taking down Mir Maluk's deposition. There were present the officer commanding the corps to which the prisoner belonged, the Subadar, the superintendent of the gaol, and a guard of some four or five Sikhs. The two white men sat at a rough wooden table in the little tank of a room which serves as the prison office; Mir Maluk, in mufti, with the skullcap of the Muhammadan, stood before them near the door, his hands fastened by iron handcuffs hanging limply before him. Round him the Sikh soldiers were grouped, while the Subadar, on the right hand of the commandant, acted as interpreter.

Now, the office of the gaol is situated in a corner of the building, and a long gallery, on to which the solitary cells open, runs round the whole square block, and leads to the office door from two directions. In one of the con-

demned cells there chanced to be at this time a Bajau outlaw of some repute, who had been captured a few months earlier, and was to be hanged on the morrow for more crimes than he had fingers to his hands. In common with other Malayans, this man had no sort of objection to killing or being killed, but he cherished a strong prejudice against dying sitting still. Hanging—which means that the killing is all on one side—offended his sense of propriety; and his ingenuity had suggested to him a more excellent way of shuffling off this mortal coil. To this end, with infinite patience and skill, he had for some days been making certain secret preparations. The gaol department of Sandakan is not over-manned; discipline is slack at times; supervision too often leaves much to be desired: and of these things Sunting, the Bajau, took full advantage. Thus he had succeeded in secreting a *pisau raut*—the blade shaped like a razor but of much tougher cast—which Malays use to scrape and prepare rattans. This weapon had probably been left at some convenient spot, where Sunting could find it when he was led forth to bathe, by a friend in the chair-making gang; and to it the convict had added a short piece of firewood. From these unpromising materials Sunting had fashioned a very serviceable dagger. He tore his waist-cloth into strips, bound the blade to the piece of firewood, and the whole contrivance to his right wrist in such a manner that his

fist was furnished with a knuckle-duster consisting of a stout blade four inches in length and of a most satisfactory keenness.

Thus equipped, Sunting waited patiently until the hour of the afternoon meal arrived; and when the sound of the warder's tread reached him, he hid himself behind the door, which chanced to open inward. The warder entered, and stooped to set the tin plates which he carried in either hand upon the floor; and as he stood bowed to the ground, Sunting leaped suddenly upon him, drove his knife-blade deep into the man's abdomen, and springing clear, watched him roll into a corner gasping desperately. A second later the war-cry was ringing through the wooden building, and Sunting, stark mad, with the fighting fury upon him, with his long hair streaming, his arms waving above his head, his face strained and eager, his eyes afire with the joy of battle, was charging down the narrow gallery, squealing with excitement and wild rage.

Before the group in the prison office had had time to do more than jump, as the unexpected outbreak of noise reached them, Sunting had stabbed and felled two of the Sikhs and, pressing through the little mob of men, was flying straight at the throat of the commanding officer of the corps. The white man, sitting there all unarmed, looked up to see the savage face of the *amok*-runner a yard or two distant, rushing toward him with lightning speed. He saw

the mouth thrown wide. He heard the pealing yell, "*Amok! Amok!*" pulsating with fierce triumph, whooping in his very ear. He could see the bloodshot eyes of the maniac glaring into his own. Almost the reek of the creature's fevered breath blew hot upon his cheek. And then, ere ever he had had time to stir hand or foot in his own defence, there was a flutter of white draperies, a guttural grunt, and the awful figure that threatened him was effaced.

Mir Maluk, the cur, the coward, the man on whom we had all emptied the vials of our contempt, had leaped to the rescue. Manacled though he was, he had thrown himself between the *amok*-runner and his victim; had caught the full weight of the savage blow upon his own naked elbow; had borne his opponent to the ground; and now, amid the litter of broken table-legs, was rolling over and over with him upon the floor, smiting him again and again with the iron fetters with which he was crippled, taking no count of the stabs that dug deep and deep into his own back and side. In a moment all the other occupants of the room had rushed to Mir Maluk's aid, the Sikhs clubbing their muskets; and presently Sunting, battered out of all human semblance, lay still in death—the death which he had sought, and which had come to him in the guise he courted, as a gift from Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate God.

Then the others gathered themselves together

and took count of their losses. In the condemned cell yonder the warder was sobbing out his life. In the gallery without the door two Sikhs lay disabled; and in the little office, side by side with the dead Bajau, was stretched the form of Mir Maluk, bleeding fearfully in twenty places, drawing laboured breath, and gazing at the pitying faces about him through eyes upon which the film was gathering.

In a passion of gratitude to the man who had given his life to save him, the commandant knelt in the red dust of the floor and took the hand of the dying man in his own strong clasp. In faltering phrases he tried to tell the story of his thanks, of his remorse for a judgment the unsoundness of which had been so suddenly, so startlingly revealed—but the words would not come. He was paralysed by the magnitude of his obligation; was humbled by a consciousness of how little he was worthy to be the object of so heroic a sacrifice; and at that moment the very identity of his preserver with Mir Maluk, the cowardly murderer of the sleeping sergeant-major, was forgotten. The man who lay stricken before him was for him the embodiment of valour, the incarnation of courage—the virtue which, to the manly man, is the highest virtue of all. That he should be living and uninjured while this brave fellow lay dying in his stead seemed to him an outrage, a hideous injustice; filled him with grief, and humiliated him mightily.

Mir Maluk moved feebly, struggling for strength to speak. Again and again his breast heaved, his lips opened and shut gaspingly, but no words came from them. Then, with a mighty effort, speech burst from him.

" Bear witness, *Sahib*," he panted. " Bear witness that . . . I die . . . a man, *Sahib* . . . a man of a fighting stock . . . a man . . . and no coward."

A great rush of blood choked his utterance, and even as the white man at his side broke out into passionate protestations, Mir Maluk, the mercenary, the murderer, the traitor, the hero, yielded up the life that was in him.

This story, I take it, is only worth telling because it chances to be true. For the rest, it needs a deeper student of psychology than myself to unravel the tangled skein which was the character of Mir Maluk, the Punjaubi Muhammadan.

## VII

## TWO LITTLE SLAVE-GIRLS

"How low soe'er men rank us,
How high soe'er we win,
The children far above us
Dwell, and they deign to love us,
With lovelier love than ours,
And smiles as sweet as flowers;
As though the sun should thank us
For letting light come in."

SWINBURNE.

OF all the religious creeds devised by the perversity of man, few are more arrogant, aggressive, or cruel than that which Muhammad preached in the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. It is of the essence of this Faith that its professors should be taught to regard all other people as creatures unworthy of consideration,—as beings who are utterly beyond the pale,—the eternal fuel of the Terrible Place in the world that is to come, and the natural prey of the Faithful while this life lasts. Barbarous and semi-civilised folk usually find such doctrines as these, which justify them in all manner of lawless deeds, exceedingly congenial. Also, when a man is set to choose between being

a pariah and an outcast with no rights of any kind, and joining the number of the True Believers, in company with whom he will hereafter be able to victimise all non-Muhammadans who may come within his reach, he does not usually find the choice difficult, or hesitate long before he makes it. If you think of these things for a little space, you will see that the secret of the wonderful success that has attended Muhammadan missionaries—concerning which so many excellent people are for ever lifting up their hands and eyes in shocked astonishment —is not really much of a mystery after all. The enticingly easy laws regulating marriage and divorce ; the solemn and impressive ritual of Muhammadan prayer ; the absolute certainty which every True Believer feels that he is destined for eternal salvation, coupled with a sure knowledge that all Infidels are eternally doomed to perdition—combine to make the Faith of Muhammad very comfortable for its professors. None of these things, however, have as much force with a rude people as the conviction that the Muhammadans form a kind of moral aristocracy, privileged and encouraged by Allah and his Prophet to spoil, oppress, and reduce to slavery all Infidels who may come within their power.

The Malays—true children of the drowsy land in which they live—are as lazy about their religion as they are concerning everything else

in the world. After several centuries of conversion to the Faith, they continue to be Malays first and Muhammadans afterwards; and the Law of God and the Law of Custom have either become inextricably entangled, or else the former has been set aside in favour of the latter. In common with all Muhammadans, good and bad, however, the Malays recognise the absolute right of the followers of the Prophet to enslave those who do not profess the Faith. To this end they preyed ruthlessly during some centuries upon the defenceless wild tribes of the far interior, killing with perfect light-heartedness those who offered resistance, and selling the weak and timid, the women-folk and the little children into a lifelong captivity. Also, whilst on the pilgrimage to Mecca in the old days, some obtained by purchase a few of the despised Habshi, so that here and there in Malayan villages the traveller may see the prognathous faces, the flat features, and the woolly heads of some unfortunate exiles from Africa.

The position of these slaves was not altogether enviable. They were regarded much in the same light as the kine in the rice-swamps, and possessed no rights of any sort. I have before me an old manuscript volume, yellow with age and thumb-marks, written in crabbed Malayan characters by the hand of one who has long ago passed to his rest. It is a copy of the *Kanun*, the Civil and Criminal Code of the Malays, and its title-page informs me that it is destined for the

use of all "Great Countries, and for all Great Kings, and for all Dependencies and Villages." There are half a hundred sections that deal entirely with slaves—all, of course, from the point of view of the employer. The feelings and the convenience of the slave are naturally not taken much into account. Since some of the provisions of the Law illustrate far more vividly than I can do the light in which these unfortunate captives were regarded in the old days of Malayan rule, I propose to translate one or two of them, and would only warn the reader that those which I have selected are by no means the most oppressive or the most callous that the Code contains :—

"If a slave be borrowed for the purpose of making him climb trees (for fruit), and the borrower makes clear to the owner the risk of breaking or killing the said slave, and if the owner makes answer saying 'If he die, let him die; and if he be broken, let him be broken,' and if, thereafter, the slave dies by reason of a fall, the borrower must none the less make good one-third of the value of the said slave."

"If a slave insult a free man, he shall be slain, or his tongue shall be split in twain, or the skin of his head shall be flayed."

"If a free man insult a slave and be resisted by the said slave, and if the free man then slay the slave, he must make good the full value of the said slave."

Some of the laws which of old regulated slavery

in Malayan lands are too ingeniously cruel to bear rendering into sober English; but the above instances will suffice to enable the reader to form some idea of the position in the community occupied by *'abdi*—slaves made from races not professing the Muhammadan Faith, and obtained by capture or by purchase—before the white men came to make the old order change, giving place to the new with an almost dislocating abruptness.

Not content with this "lawful" form of slavery, which is recommended and approved by the Kuran, the Malays invented a system of their own, or more probably perpetuated a custom which had existed in these lands before the Arabian missionaries brought the light of their teaching into the dark places of Asia. This system is known as Debt Slavery, and its victims are called *hamba ber-utang*, or debt-slaves, in contradistinction to the *'abdi*, or bought or captured slaves. The basis of this form of slavery was money or goods. A man who chanced for the time to be in poor circumstances sought out some rich neighbour and, in consideration of a small loan, voluntarily surrendered himself and his family, and their descendants for ever, as debt-slaves to his creditor or his posterity. The contract once made, the debtor, and all the people involved by him in the bargain, became in a sense the property of their creditor. They were bound to work for him without pay—to plant his fields, weed and tend his crops, to wash and guard his kine, to accompany him to Court

when he desired a following, to punt his boat, to attend him upon his journeys, to cook his rice, and to serve in his house, if so required. The master of slave-debtors usually fed and clothed his dependants more or less sufficiently; but, as they had no opportunity of earning money, all their time being the property of their creditor, they had no chance of ever paying off their liabilities. If their master proved to be harsh or cruel, they were bound to bear it as best they could; or they might, perhaps, persuade some other rich man to take over their debt, and so effect a change in the person of their owner, if not in the nature of their servitude. Theoretically, they had the right to make such arrangements, and the original owner of a family of slave-debtors was bound to accept payment in lieu of service if the former chanced to be offered by or on behalf of the slaves. In practice, however, this, his last right, was often denied to the slave-debtor; and he was forced to continue to serve a man whose oppressive conduct had rendered him hateful, even though others were willing to make good the amount of the debt by virtue of which he was held in thrall.

In such circumstances, it would be natural to suppose that only in time of great stress, when famine had driven men to desperation, or when some other equally pressing need for money had blinded them to the consequences of their acts, would any sane man be found who was prepared to avail himself of a system under which the

advantages gained were so trifling and temporary, while the price paid for them was so heavy and so enduring. To imagine this, however, you must be entirely ignorant of the improvident Malayan nature. No one of this singular people can ever realise the future. He may know with absolute certainty that some action of his will lead to thoroughly understood and most unpleasant consequences; he may have object-lessons on every hand, in the persons of those who are already suffering heavy things because they have in their time been guilty of similar acts of folly: but the present is the present to him, and the future the future. The one is fully realised; the other is dim, distant, utterly beyond his grip did he try to forecast it. The one holds what Thomas à Kempis calls "a present delightful good"; the other has hidden in its womb misery and sore trouble. He sees the one clearly; the other is, for the time, as a thing of no meaning: and thus it is that Malays were always ready to sell themselves, and those whom they held dear, into a lifelong bondage for twenty dollars in silver, or for a hundred bushels of rice.

The white men, in those States of the Peninsula which are now under British protection, early set themselves to stamp out this system of debt-slavery. In some cases the Government itself stepped in and acted as debt-payer, freeing those who were held in servitude by refunding the sums originally borrowed; in others, debt-

slaves were registered with the amount of their liabilities, a certain fixed value was placed upon their labour, and they were thus enabled to work off their indebtedness. Gradually—not without much trouble, not without occasioning many heartburnings among the folk of the opulent classes, not without strenuous opposition in many cases from the slaves themselves, who preferred the security of their indolent servitude to being cast upon the world, there to seek a living by the sweat of their brows—the whole system has been stamped out. The right of any man to enter into such a contract of servitude is no longer recognised, and the children of debt-slaves, who were still working off their advances, under the new arrangement are no longer considered to be in any way responsible for the obligations of their parents. This is now thoroughly known and understood by all classes of the native population; so men of substance have become shy of lending their silver on the security of a peasant's promises of service, since those who have contracted such obligations are not slow to lay their cases before the European officers if they grow weary of their servitude. Now and again, however, some rich man will try to trade upon the folly or the ignorance of his debtors, and will force them to work for him on the old footing without guerdon, until such time as the matter comes to the ears of the nearest white man, and his well-laid plans are knocked rudely out of gear.

This explanation is long, and may be without interest to many, but it is necessary for the understanding of the incident which I am about to relate—the story of two very small brown children and the great and awful British Government.

It was the hour when the kine go down to wallow in the shallows of the river. The slanting rays of the afternoon sun, which now was drawing rapidly near to the forest-girt horizon, were streaking the surface of the running water with long bars of pale colour; the shadows were gathering thickly—olive and bronze near the river banks where the deep pools eddied and swirled under the overhanging boughs; dusty brown and grey beneath the drooping fronds of the palm trees around the village; coal-black and lustreless in the tiny recesses between tree and tree and shrub and shrub, where the heavy jungle reared its tangled masses from the edge of the water. And all the shadows—green and bronze, brown and grey and black alike—were powdered with innumerable specks and spangles of sunlight, dancing and restless. The herds of black and pink water-buffaloes stood knee-deep in the shallows, or wallowed clumsily, their blunt noses, spreading black horns, and twitching ears alone protruding above the surface of the stream. All the voices of Nature were blending in the evensong which came alike from village, rice-swamp, and jungle—

the squeaky low of the buffaloes ; the bleat of a stray goat ; the clucking of drowsy fowls ; the scream of the earth-worms ; the hoarse croaking of thousands of frogs, all clearing their throats at once in preparation for a musical evening ; the ticking, and whirring, and trumpeting of all kinds of tree insects, through which now and again a noisy beetle broke discordantly with a triumphant, lilting shriek ; the trilling of distant thrushes ; the cheeping of many little birds, settling themselves to sleep with much rustling of tiny feathers ; and once in a while the discordant yell of a peafowl far away across the river. Above the thatched roofs of the huts that formed the village the thin smoke of the wood fires, over which the evening rice was cooking, hung low and blurred like a patch of isolated mist. And amidst all these peaceful surroundings, within hearing of the sounds of the late afternoon, two little Malay girls were putting in a very bad quarter of an hour.

They were quite young children, the elder being perhaps eleven years of age, while her sister was her junior by nearly two years. Their hair was twisted into little neat knots at the back of their necks, giving them the air of miniature women rather than of children. They were dressed in coarse blouses dyed dark blue with indigo, and cheap cotton *sarongs* made fast about their waists. Their garments were old, and tattered, and stained ; their little faces were pinched and thin ; their arms, protruding from the

tight sleeves of their blouses, were very slender and wasted. Both had wet eyes—the elder girl weeping passionately the tears of despair ; the younger crying bitterly too, but with more restraint ; and it was not difficult to see that resentment and rebellion, rather than mere hopelessness and distress, had brought the tears to her cheeks. They sat in the wet underwood, upon which the dew was already beginning to form, beneath some ill-kept fruit trees at the edge of the compound, and they paid no heed to an angry voice which now and again called them by name from the doorway of a neighbouring hut—called to them with many ugly threats, curses, and coarse epithets. The kindly scrub hid them securely, and the great bulky shadows drew near and helped to cover them.

"*Ahi! Ahi! Ahi! Ambui! O Ma'!*" sobbed Iang, the elder girl. "Little sister, I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it!"

The dim figure once more appeared at the doorway, outlined blackly against the ruddy firelight within.

"Iang, Minah! Iang, Minah! O Iang! O Minah! Come hither! Come speedily! Accursed ones! Are your ears deaf? Come, do you not hear? May you die violent deaths! Children of an evil mother! You are too lazy to live, and yet you will not die! Come, indolent ones! Listen to me, I call for you!"

The speaker stood for a moment looking out into the gathering darkness. Then he swore

under his breath, spat ostentatiously in token of his deep disgust, and turned back into the house, muttering angrily.

Iang gazed at him with a sort of fascination of fear, but Minah shook her tiny fist in his direction, and as he disappeared into the hut she said in a tense whisper—

" May he be slain by a spear that is cast! May he die stabbed, bow-strung, and impaled cross-wise ! " The time-honoured curses of her people came quaintly from her pouting baby lips; but her little set face showed that her hatred of the man was a very real thing indeed to this small savage child. Then she turned to her sister.

" Thou sayest that thou canst not bear it, Iang. As for me, I *will* not bear it longer."

Iang looked at her disconsolately.

" What profits it to speak thus ? " she sobbed. " We be like unto the fish caught in the stakes. We have no power, no stratagem ; we can do nought but weep. *Ahi! Ahi! Ahi!* " and she buried her face in her hands despairingly.

Minah glanced at her sister with something like contempt in her eyes. " Do not weep, sister," she said. " Tears are of no avail. I say that I will not bear it longer, and, sister, I have a plan ! "

They were a curious contrast to one another, these two little girls, both born of the same parents ; both brought up, or rather allowed to scramble up, in the same village and amid

the same surroundings. Iang was of the pretty flaccid type, that would in time develop into the pale, round-faced, rather ample beauty which endures for so short a time and is so dear to the hearts of Malayan men. Her great soft eyes were tender and shrinking, a trifle bovine perhaps, even a little stupid, but beautiful in their own way, as are the eyes of many dumb animals. Now they showed larger than was natural, for the child was starved and thin. Minah, on the other hand, was very dark in colour and very meagre in form—"black as the bottom of a cooking-pot, and dry as a smoked sprat," would have been the unflattering description of her appearance supplied by the proverbial similes of her own people. Her features were sharp, her figure was angular though wiry, but her little face was alive with nervous energy, and her eyes, bright and alert, were quick with intelligence. She hated the man who had called them from the doorway of the hut most vehemently. When their parents died, he had forced them to come and live with him, alleging that some old debt, of which the children knew nothing, gave him the right to claim their services. He had fed and clothed them after a fashion, simply because it was necessary to keep the little wretches in some sort of health if they were to work for him to the extent that he considered necessary; but from the first he had treated them as the slaves they were. So long as they had lived with their parents, though the two

little sisters had had to do a large share of the household toil,—as is the custom among all the poorer classes of Malays,—their father and mother had loved them, and had treated them with the tenderness which always distinguishes the dealings of native parents with their children. So the little creatures had been happy in their lives, and had done their share of the work blithely and merrily. Now their parents had been exchanged for a harsh taskmaster who regarded them simply as slaves and labourers; who was utterly out of sympathy with them; who cared nothing for their childish joys and sorrows; who obviously grudged them their victuals; and if he chanced to see them playing together, or heard one of them prattling or laughing with the other, cried to them angrily to set about their work, and thought that they were robbing him, though they stole nothing but a moment's leisure. He gave them a cuff or two now and again if the rice were ill-cooked, or the fuel which they were made to fetch from the forest around them were not dry, well-seasoned, and plentiful; but as a rule he, like all Malays, was fairly sparing of his blows. That afternoon, however, the two poor mites had forgotten their duties in the intoxication of a game of *porok* with half a dozen other village urchins, and Che' Awang Uda, their master, had found them spinning the sections of cocoa-nut shell with their deft little feet, when they should have been filling the water-gourds for the house

with their weary little hands. Then Che' Awang had felt that indeed he did well to be angry, so he had administered a more or less sound beating to both the children, Iang taking her punishment with piteous cries and lamentations, while her little sister fought like a wild cat, and did her tiny best to retaliate in kind. Now the poor children had increased their guilt by hiding in the brushwood and refusing to answer their master's call; and Iang already felt her body aching from the fresh beating which she knew must surely be her lot in the near future. Not so Minah. She had no intention of being beaten again, and she said so determinedly, adding once more that she had a plan.

Iang did not appear to find much comfort in her little sister's assurances, but after a moment's thought the latter began to speak calmly and earnestly.

"Listen, sister," she said. "It were well for us to run away. We can no longer bear the cruelty of Che' Awang. Let us take a dugout and set forth to seek the white folk. Men say that they will by no means suffer people to be held as slaves; and thou knowest, sister, that we owe nought to Che' Awang. We are sore oppressed by being thus held in slavery, for the white men will not suffer it."

"How dost thou know, little sister?" asked Iang.

"I heard Imam Teh speaking with Che' Awang. He took no thought of me because I am little,

and he judged that I should not understand. He said, 'Have a care, Che' Awang, lest the white folk learn of thy doings in the matter of these children, for they will make sore trouble if they hear what thou hast done.' Then Che' Awang laughed, and said, 'It matters little, for the white folk live very far away; and what man will tell them concerning the children?—for all the people in this village owe money to me, and if I so willed it I could sell their land and their kine—even *thy* land and *thy* kine, O Imam! Wherefore it were well for the folk of this place to be wise in the matter of their speech.' Imam Teh had a sour face when he heard the words, and he said no more to Che' Awang concerning us. Now, sister, let us go seek the white men, for they will free us."

"I am afraid," whimpered Iang. "Dost remember the white man that came to the village to seek fuel in his fire-*prahu*? He had white hair, and his eyes also were white, and the hair of his head grew down his cheeks to his chin, and thence into the breast of his coat. His skin was red and much blistered, and he was very angry with the men of the village because they were slow in the loading of the fuel. He spoke, too, with a strange tongue, very harsh and discordant, so that I could by no means understand his words."

"Yes," cried Minah, "I remember his coming, and he called us to him, and thou wast afraid and would not approach; but I went to him, and

he spoke strange things, and thereafter gave me two little silver coins."

"But he was so very ugly, Minah. Better it were to die here than to go seek the white folk. Though it rain gold in the stranger country, and rain nought but stones in the land that is our own, still our native country is the better—thou knowest the saying of the old people, little sister."

"I know," returned Minah. "But the proverb sayeth nought of a land in which it raineth *blows*. There are more of such rainfalls awaiting thee in the hut yonder. If thou fearest the white men more than the *rotan*, get thee back to the house, and Che' Awang will surely give thee thy bellyful of chastisement. For me, I will no longer bear it. To-night I escape to the white men; and if thou wilt not come with me, I shall go alone."

"But the place where the white men dwell is very far away," sobbed Iang hopelessly.

"Men say that they live at Pekan, three days down river, near to the seashore."

"Three days for men who paddle hard, little sister; but for us many days. And how shall we know the place when at last we reach it?—for we have never visited it."

"We shall know it by the sea," said Minah confidently.

"But how shall we know the sea?—for that also we have never seen. O sister, it were indeed better to suffer as we now do rather than

to brave the dangers of which we know nothing."

"We shall know the sea when we come to it. It is like a river, only bigger."

"And we shall starve."

"No; I have made provision. During many days, when we have been pounding the *padi*, I have saved little dues of rice. Also I have hidden the cracked cooking-pot in the *lalang* grass yonder. Wait here while I go thither and fetch it."

The night had fallen now, and an even darkness lay brooding over the moist, hot land. Iang sat huddled up in the shadows, sobbing and dejected, while Minah stole out of their hiding-place and cautiously approached the hut. The stores which she had long been collecting as provisions for her journey were hidden in a disused rice-bin under the flooring of the house, among the piles upon which it rested. She reached the place safely, and secured her treasures. Then she began to make her way through the darkness back to the spot where she had left her sister. As she emerged from under the house, Awang Uda suddenly threw the door open, and stood, torch in hand, peering into the blackness of the night. Minah darted back into cover with the agility of some startled forest creature; but so close was she to him that she could hear his heavy breathing and the half-inarticulate curses which the man was muttering to himself. He did not call to

the children again, fearing, perhaps, to let his neighbours know that they were still missing, and Minah could see that he was anxious and perturbed. At the end of a few minutes he re-entered his house, closing the door after him, and Minah crept away noiselessly to join her sister.

"Come, Iang," she whispered, when she at last made out the little form which was almost obliterated by the great shadows around it. "Come, all is ready. Follow me."

"I come," said Iang, as she rose to her feet. She had always been dominated by her little sister, and though she was very fearful and unhappy at the idea of undertaking so difficult a journey, and embarking in an enterprise so hazardous, she followed meekly, fearing even more to be left behind by her resolute junior.

The two children picked their way as best they could to the edge of the high bank upon which the village stood. Thence they scrambled down the steep slope to the river. They found many dugouts lying tied by *rotan* painters to boat-poles stuck upright in the earth, and into one of these they crawled. The little boat was half full of water, but they baled it out, and then cast loose the moorings and pushed off from the bank. The river was running with a gentle purring sound; and on its surface it was less dark, by a shade or two, than it had been beneath the shelter of the fruit-groves. Still the children could see nothing save the shimmer of half-

light upon the face of the water, and far up above them a sleepy star or two peeping through the heavy cloud banks. Minah had managed to hide a couple of boat-paddles together with her other gear, and each child took one of them Minah steering, while Iang paddled at the bow, still sobbing miserably.

Like all Malayan children, born and bred on the banks of the rivers, Iang and Minah were as much at home upon the water as they were upon the dry land. They both understood the management of a dugout as thoroughly as one could desire; they both swam with ease and grace; and for them the river itself had no terrors. What they did fear most mightily was the Unknown into which they were journeying. The section of the world with which the up-country native is familiar is often very circumscribed indeed. I have known Malays who have lived for near fourscore and ten years, and who, during all that long, long time, have never wandered farther than fifty miles in any direction from the place in which they were born. One old chief, now dead, for whom I had a very great affection, had never passed beyond the limits of a radius of twenty miles drawn around his home during a life which, so men said, ran well into a second century; yet he was the possessor of more curious knowledge than any other man of his class whom I have ever known. The few square miles of jungle and river and village with which he was acquainted had been to him a

subject of the most loving study during a lifetime. He knew every inch of the country with marvellous thoroughness; he knew every legend and tradition connected with it; he knew every lesson that his jungles and his villages could teach to a man; and when I have sat talking to him till the dawn was red—for he was a very bad sleeper in the nights of his extreme old age—I have often found myself wondering whether when all is said and done, a man with brains, keen power of observation, and a sufficient imagination, may not learn as much from studying five square miles of territory with completeness as do many who have all the world for their schoolroom and a jumble of inchoate knowledge for their pains.

The world for Minah and her sister had hitherto been bounded by a village half a mile up-stream, whither they had gone occasionally to help in the weeding of the crops; by the little shady graveyard, where the round headstones stood about in disorder among the rank grasses and the *sudu* plants; by half a mile of jungle beyond the rice swamps at the rear of the compound; and across the river by half a mile of the virgin forest which rose sheer from the banks of the stream. Now they were setting out upon a journey which they knew would last for several days. They had no scale of distance by which to measure things other than the fathom which they now felt to be alarmingly inadequate to their require-

ments—and indeed, when you try to reduce eighty miles of running river to fathoms, the figures that result are somewhat terrifying. Not that the little girls attempted to do anything of the sort. The very fact that the distance ahead of them was to them measureless added not a little to its terrors. If you can put yourself in the position of a traveller who, on setting forth, finds that miles, as units of distance, have shrunk into utter insignificance, as a man might do who was starting upon a voyage to one of the more remote stars, you will be able to understand dimly in what guise the prospect of this journey presented itself to the minds of these little brown babies, and you will perhaps sympathise with Minah, who soon found her courage oozing out of the tips of her fingers and the tears running down her cheeks. As for Iang, she had been weeping piteously from the first, and every now and again she implored her sister to return and abandon the enterprise. But Minah, though she wept furtively in the darkness, and was afraid to the marrow of her little bones, would not allow her resolution to be shaken. She whispered words of encouragement to Iang, steadying her voice bravely for the purpose; and thus in tears and in dread the long journey was begun.

The musical noises of the jungle night made sleepy melody for the children as they journeyed. The bell-like note of the tree-frog, the hoot of

the peafowls, the ticking of the insects, the very distant trumpeting of an elephant, the sharp bark of a stag near the edge of a clearing on the bank, the snorting of wild swine heard once or twice as the passage of the boat near the shore startled a herd of them into panic-stricken flight, and once the brisk and angry clang of a gun—each came in turn, emphasising the noisy silence of the forest. All night the children paddled bravely, falling asleep over their work, and recovering themselves with a start just as their paddles were dropping from their grasp. They went forward, borne by the current rather than by the strength of their feeble rowing—now grounding upon a sand-bank, to get clear of which called for a heart-breaking struggle; now wandering into a backwater, which they mistook for the main stream; while ever and anon a rock would start up before them out of the gloom menacingly, as the roar of the waters eddying around it set their little hearts beating with terror. And ever the agony of the effort by which alone they could keep awake, and the utter exhaustion that exertion brought them after a day of such unusual emotions, weighed heavily like a tangible burden. They seemed to be part and parcel of a hideous nightmare: fear of the darkness oppressed and daunted them; dread of the journey that lay ahead was magnified now exceedingly; pursuit, capture, and dire punishment seemed to be their certain fate; and

if they did succeed in reaching the town that men called Pekan, their only hope of deliverance lay in the protection that might be afforded to them by the white strangers—a race of men as weird and awful to these little brown girls as the ogres of our own nursery tales. Even Minah lost heart completely now; and had it not been that the current forbade retreat, she would very willingly have returned to the familiar village, and have submitted to the worst that Che' Awang could inflict.

The dawn, breaking wanly, looked into the faces of the two children through a drenching veil of mist, and found them grey and haggard, their figures bent and drooping with fatigue. Minah, chilled to the bone and sodden with the damp dews, made shift to guide the dugout into a tiny creek over which the jungle trees arched, forming a dark and gloomy tunnel. Here the boat was hidden, and the two children dragged their cramped limbs on to the shore, and fell asleep as soon as their heads touched the ground. There they lay, locked in one another's arms, utterly alone in the great forest.

It was past noon when they woke, and Minah, resolute again now that daylight had brought a renewal of her courage, washed the rice in the stream, and, after a mighty tussle with a tinder box, made a fire upon which to cook it. The food refreshed them, and even Iang began to take a more hopeful view of their prospects. After they had eaten, they slept

again; and when they woke, the jungle was noisy with its evensong, and the darkness was beginning to fall. They ate the remainder of their boiled rice, packed their gear into the dug-out, and set forth anew on their adventurous way.

This night passed like the preceding one, but it held something less of terror, for their unexpected success had given the children confidence. All the next day they lay hidden in the jungle, and once or twice they saw a boat creep by on its way up-stream, or speed swiftly down, borne by the current. In one they thought they recognised the figures of Che' Awang himself and a few of the villagers with whom they were familiar; and Iang, gripped suddenly by a keen home-sickness, was hardly to be restrained from shouting to them to attract attention. Even hostile faces, so be it they were not those of strangers, seemed welcome to her in the heart of this vast and fearful wilderness into which her little sister had led her. Minah prevented the indiscretion just in time, and again the journey was continued as soon as the night had come.

For more than a week the two little girls travelled in this fashion, lying up in the forest by day, and speeding forward as best they might under the screen of darkness; and as the dawn was yellowing for the ninth day, they found themselves in sight of the largest "compound" that they had ever seen. The river was nearly a mile across in this place,

so that more than once the children had questioned whether they had not already reached the sea—the mighty waters, "bigger than a river," of which they had heard men speak. The banks were covered with villages as far as the eye could carry; the very islands spattered over the broad reaches were thick with palm groves and the thatched roofs of houses; and far away there rose certain huge white objects covered by great expanses of red stuff, or by things which looked like gigantic kerosene-tins. These were the whitewashed stone and brick shops of the Chinese, with their roofs of tile or corrugated iron—wonderful things in the eyes of the little up-country savages.

"O Minah," whispered Iang, frightened out of her wits, "let us make for the jungle."

The jungle is always the place of refuge in which the natives of the interior seek safety in time of peril.

"Nay," cried Minah, biting her lips resolutely. "This must be Pekan, the place where the white men dwell. We must press on. There is no jungle here in which we may find a hiding-place. The white folk are . . . good. They will treat us . . . kindly."

Even her faith faltered a little, now that the supreme hour had come. The white men were certainly horrible to look at, and who could say whether in truth their hearts were good?

"I am sore afraid, Minah," cried Iang, beginning to sob miserably. "Let us go back."

"Stupid!" said her sister viciously. "How can we go back? Our store of rice is finished. Moreover, remember the saying of the men of ancient days: 'If we must be struck, let it be with a hand that weareth a ring; if we must be kicked, let it be by a foot that weareth a sandal!' The white folk wear rings and boots, for I have seen them."

"But they are like unto the *raja*-people, and such, all men know, have the hearts of tigers," wept Iang.

"And Che' Awang?" snapped Minah. "What of him? Was not his heart that of a jungle pig? Let us be devoured by tigers rather than torn by swine, say I. Paddle, lazy one, paddle!"

Borne down by the sheer strength of her small sister's will, Iang said no more; but she gazed at the river-side town—a poor, shabby little place, in all truth, but marvellous and awe-inspiring to her—with terror in her heart.

At last the boat was brought up at the Residency landing-stage; and the two little waifs made it fast, and then stepped ashore, moving stiffly, for their limbs were cramped with squatting at the paddles, and their privations had told upon them. They gazed around them with wondering looks, for the trim neatness of the place, the well-kept streets and ordered packs of shop-buildings, were very strange to them after the confusion of their native compounds. The houses were veritable palaces, to

their thinking; and among them sauntered yellow Chinamen, coal-black Tamils, and now and again a couple of bearded Sikh policemen, all of whom were to the children creatures of a separate creation from that to which they owed their being. There were many Malays too in the street, loafing gloriously for the most part after the fashion of their race; and to two of these the little girls addressed themselves, turning instinctively to folk of their own breed, even though their faces were unfamiliar.

"Is this the place where the white men live?" inquired Minah.

"And if it be, what want you with the white men?" asked one of the loafers.

"I want to talk to them."

The loafer laughed.

"And about what would you speak to the white men?" he asked.

"I have business," said Minah importantly.

The loafer appealed to the crowd at large.

"Behold, my brothers!" he cried. "This child is beyond a doubt the eldest daughter of the King of the Ants, and she hath come hither on business—on weighty business, mark ye—with the white men. Perchance she seeketh a husband from among them."

Minah stamped her foot upon the ground angrily.

"Be still," she cried. "Be still, and lead me to the white men."

The loafer affected to be overcome with fear.

"Have mercy," he cried, abasing himself before her.

"What manner of a village is this," cried Minah, turning in despair to her sister, "where the grown men are stricken with madness so that they do nought but belch follies?"

A little Malay policeman bustled up with the ostentatious importance of his kind.

"What is this? What is this?" he inquired bullyingly.

"These high-born ladies come hither seeking the white men. Hast ever heard tell of the white men, man without a waist-skirt?"

The policeman, made suddenly conscious of the fact that he was indecently clad in uniform, which does not allow of the use of the national skirt, scowled furiously, and the crowd laughed.

"Get you about your business, you idle folk," cried the policeman. "And you," turning to the children, "if you desire to see the white people, come with me."

Later two little draggled and worn-out shreds of humanity were brought into my study; and later still, when they had made the discovery that white men did not eat small children, and that I could speak their tongue, they perched one on each of my knees, and, thawed and reassured by the sucking of barley sugar, thus they told to me their tale.

After that all was soon arranged. Che' Awang Uda was sent for, and when he had made the

journey of near a hundred and twenty miles down-stream, he arrived at Pekan in as palpitating a state of funk as ever conscience-made coward was reduced to before or since. I took it out of Awang Uda, for his soul's salvation, in a fashion that I flatter myself he will long remember; and when I had ploughed him this way and that with all the choicest harrows of the Malayan vocabulary, and had put the fear of death into what did duty within him for a soul, I handed him over to the Law, which fined him roundly, and sent him home again a wiser and a sadder man.

Trustworthy relations of my two little girl friends were sought out; and eventually the children were handed over to them, to lead, I hope, as happy a life as is possible for orphans in this land, where, if it cannot resuscitate dead parents, the Government at any rate does its clumsy best to take their place. Iang, when I saw her last, was blossoming into a beauty, while Minah is as dried-up a little chip as ever; but a young lady who knows her own mind as thoroughly as she does can probably secure happiness even though comeliness be lacking.

The British Government works upon a big scale, and does many surprising and wonderful things; but I like to remember that once at least that huge, flint-hearted organism appeared to two little brown children in the light of a foster-mother, to whom they might run fearlessly for comfort and protection.

## VIII

## THE APPOINTED HOUR

He sat in a private room in one of the biggest hotels in London, cowering over the fire, and enduring with little gladness the rigours of an English June. Outside, below our windows, a crowd of men and women, Americans for the most part, dressed in every variety of summer costume,—the light frocks of the ladies and the straw hats of the men defiantly ignoring the weather,—heaved restlessly in rocking-chairs, each one of which was out of time with its fellows. Now and again shrill whistles summoned hansom or four-wheeler; the hoofs of horses *clop-clopped* regularly, or skidded on the wet asphalt with a scratching sound; at intervals a string-band, hidden from sight, burst out into gay music; dulled by distance and the closed windows, the roar of traffic in the Strand came to us in a continuous sullen murmur. Within, the electric lights, triumphing over the melancholy gloom which was all the daylight that the fog vouchsafed us, lit up the showy furniture, and gave to the room an air that was theatrical.

Everything around us seemed to emphasise the extreme modernity of the place—to speak of a world in which all things are ordered carefully for the comfort of man, provided that he can pay for them ; where machinery replaces the products of Nature—even God's own sunshine ; and where so much is done *for* us that many are tempted to forget to act, or even to think for themselves. Here, spread around us, crushed into an area of a few square miles, was the very heart of latter-day civilisation ; yet the man who sat opposite to me, over against the blazing fire, and I who spoke with him, cherished memories of another and a distant land—of days long dead, when naked knife and spear ruled our straitened world ; and as, for the moment, our hearts were sick for the great still forests, and for the sun-glare of my friend's fatherland, we spoke of times and men and places very distant, nor found aught discordant between such thoughts and our present circumstances.

At last the little brown man who faced me threw himself back in his big arm-chair, laughing softly.

"It is not good," he said, "to think of bygone times, when our bodies were young and our hearts untamed ; for though in his riper years a man may have put away from him wickedness, and may have turned his thoughts to the Faith and to Allah, and the teachings of His Prophet, the little devil that lurks within

him loves to set the red blood leaping as of old, and to light the fires of desire in his breast, so that presently he falls a-longing for the unregenerate days.

"Now suddenly the memory ariseth within me of the first man that ever I slew—for in those times never did I bid others do the work for me that lay to my hand. That killing was not at all good, and my heart surely was very evil; and yet . . . it is certain that the Appointed Hour had come for him,—that he was doomed to die; else he had acted more discreetly, and had taken thought ere ever he moved me to wrath.

"He was a common person named Mat Resad—a man of no birth nor breeding—but through skilful trading he had become suddenly wealthy. Now wealth is a great evil, for it mounteth to the heads of many like unto strong drink, puffing them up with arrogance, so that they become an offence to those who behold them. Thus it was with the man Mat Resad—for he had neither courtesy, nor decency, nor honour. What could you expect from one who lacked birth and breeding? You know the proverb of our people: 'No matter how high the rice-bird may soar, in the end he alighteth on the back of a water-buffalo'—and so it was with Mat Resad, the son of common folk.

"Yet, for a little space, having won wealth, he ruffled it proudly; and we, who were of the

Blood Royal, were irked by his airs and his graces, by his ostentations and his arrogance. Moreover, being himself peasant-bred, he soon gathered about him all manner of low riff-raff—traders and sons of commoners, mean folk like unto himself,—and calling them his 'followers,' dared to champion their cause against all men of birth who would have their will of them. It is quite certain that this man was foredoomed to a violent death, and for him the Appointed Hour drew near apace.

"Now in those days I was newly wed, and my people lived in my big boat which was moored to the river-bank, while every night I got me to the palace of my father-in-law, which stood behind the long bamboo fences. And Mat Resad also lived in his trading-boat, made fast a little lower down the stream.

"In the palace of my father-in-law there were many maidens, daughters of sharks every one of them, with jaws agape seeking whom they might devour, and one of them was famous for her beauty. She is alive even yet, a little shrivelled crone, bent and wrinkled like a gnarled fruit tree; but at that time many courted her for her loveliness—and I, though I was but three months wed with a woman of mine own blood, had still a little love to spare for her. But this girl's heart was filled with desire as big and as disproportionate as is the desire of the sand-fly, which, men say, cherish-

eth the ambition of some day swallowing a man whole; and no number of lovers, nor yet the gifts they brought to her, could satisfy her quite.

"Therefore Mat Resad, the rich man,—common fellow of no birth though he was,—found favour in her sight, and he went abroad vaingloriously boasting of his triumphs.

"Now this was a great shame to all the household of my father-in-law, and I had a mind to conserve his honour; for I was but three months wedded to his daughter, as I have said. Also, perhaps, my heart, being young and evil, was filled with venom because this girl, Andak Ibul, made no distinction between folk of noble and of common blood. Women are very strange, for oft-times they love in crooked fashion, and know not at all the good from the bad. Of all this I said no word, but with much patience I awaited the Appointed Hour. Also, when Mat Resad boasted of Andak Ibul's favours, it seemed to me that the Hour was very near at hand.

"Now one day a trader of Menangkabau arrived from the lower country, and made fast his boat at the village of my father-in-law. He had with him certain garments, trousers of fine silk texture, very wonderfully made; and since in those days I loved to go abroad clad gaily to delight the hearts of the maidens, I sent word that I stood in need of two of these trousers. There chanced at that time to be

a chief paying court to my father-in-law, and he, when he heard that I desired these garments, made haste to pleasure me. Therefore he took from the man of Menangkabau two very splendid pieces, and bringing them to me, lifting up his hands in homage, begged me to accept one as a present from himself, paying a price only for the other. This, therefore, I did; and presently, when the chief had obtained the boon that he sought, he returned down-river to his home.

"Now it chanced that this chief omitted to pay anything to the man of Menangkabau for the garment which he had presented to me, and the trader made a great stir, saying behind my back that I had robbed him by taking two garments and paying for one only. Yet, being a prudent person, this man of Menangkabau did not come to me himself with this frivolous story, but tried to find means so that others might plead his cause for him. Then Mat Resad, the exceedingly low-born one, because he took pride in being regarded as the champion of all insignificant people, had the hardihood to insinuate himself into the dispute. This certainly shows that a great madness had come upon him, and also that the Appointed Hour was near its dawn.

"One day, therefore, Mat Resad came to the palace of my father-in-law at about the hour of high noon, when I was still a-bed, and made a mighty outcry, demanding payment for the

garment on behalf of the man of Menangkabau. Now my father-in-law was a *raja* of a very wrathful nature, and when he beheld Mat Resad swaggering through the gate of his fence, and arrogantly demanding money, he roared like a bull, and the whole place was in tumult. For my father-in-law was angry with Mat Resad because of the love affair betwixt him and the girl Andak Ibul; for handmaidens of the palace are not for people of mean origin. Moreover, it may be that my father-in-law too had cast a casual eye upon the girl, even as I myself had done, though I was barely three months wed to the lady his daughter; for in those times it was the wont of all *raja*-folk to love a great many people.

"When I awoke, therefore, men told me what Mat Resad had done, and how with curses my father-in-law had driven him forth from within the palace; and I too was very angry. Also my father-in-law said certain very pungent things to me, and this served to heighten my wrath against Mat Resad.

"Next day, before the noontide, ere yet I had gone from the palace to my moored boat, Mat Resad came there and made trouble with my followers, babbling foolish words, and saying many things that were rude and unmannerly; and in due course all this too was reported to me. Also the rumour came to me of certain new vaunts of Mat Resad concerning Andak Ibul, and it seemed to me that the girl's

love towards me cooled somewhat. This filled full the measure of Mat Resad's offending.

" On the morrow, a little after the hour of midday prayer, I rose up from my sleeping-mat within the palace, and went down to my boat moored at the river-bank, wherein all my followers were dwelling. And behold on the punting-platform forward sat Mat Resad waiting for me.

" At first I spoke him fair, asking what he sought; but when with great imprudence and effrontery he began to disclose the matter of the debt which—so he claimed—was due to the man of Menangkabau on account of the garment given to me by the chief, my liver within me grew hot as a burning coal. Then I upbraided him, calling him low-born and very arrogant, and asking him how he dared make trouble even within the fence of my father-in-law on account of this paltry affair, and he was sulky and insolent. He lifted up his hands in homage, sitting there at my feet; but I knew that the liver within him was stubborn and did no homage, and I saw that the Appointed Hour was come.

" Then a mighty frenzy seized upon me, and all things became dyed the colour of blood: my dagger leaped from its scabbard, and I struck and struck and struck.

" The blood spouted from him,—as spouts water from the engine-thing wherewith men cleanse the wooden pavements of this town after

the night hath fallen,—so that I was drenched thereby ; but I heeded not, for the madness was upon me, and presently he rolled over, falling into the belly of the boat. Thereafter he said '*Hauk, Hauk, Hauk!*' very deep in his throat, and his body heaved a little this way and that ere he died.

"There were seventeen wounds upon him, so men told me, and I myself suffered afterwards from certain chills, for his blood had put a spell upon me ; but I take little blame for what happened. It is quite certain that Mat Resad was doomed to die, and it was the finger of Allah, and the Appointed Hour, not I that slew him. Also Andak Ibul was a very pretty girl, else she had hardly won my love, seeing that I was barely three months wed to a lady of mine own blood!"

My little brown friend edged nearer to the fire, spreading out his thin, delicate hands to the blaze —those hands which had taken the life of Mat Resad that day long ago: but for the moment I scarcely saw him. Instead there floated before my sight a vision of the great tawny river of his fatherland, rolling majestically to the sea between high walls of forest ; of the red earth where the running waters had cut the bank cleanly ; of the bamboo fence which enclosed the rude palace of a native king ; of the glory of vivid vegetation ; of the blazing sun-glare pouring down from heavens infinitely blue ; and of that poor mangled thing, the victim of the Appointed Hour, lying

stark and awful in the midst of so much loveliness.

A moment later I was recalled to London and civilisation, for the bandsmen below us had suddenly burst into song—

> "Peace, peace, leave them in peace,
> For the weak must be ruled by the strong;
> And the spear and the knife
> Are no longer at strife
> In the beautiful Valley of Bong!"

And I fell a-wondering how many Appointed Hours have been indefinitely postponed since the British Government took charge of the country of which to-day my friend is one of the brightest and most respectable ornaments.

## IX

## THE NATURE OF AN OATH

" I WILL sue thee and harry thee, and in the end the kine shall pass into my keeping. Thy face shall be blackened with shame, and thine honour shall be shorn from thee, for on my side are many witnesses and the law of the white folk."

" And on my side abideth Allah and the justice of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

A jeering laugh and a blasphemous gibe answered the calm speech, and Abdul Rahman—" servant of the Merciful "—slapped his chest in defiant fashion, and swaggered off vaingloriously, uttering as he went words that made light of the Master to whose service his very name was a dedication. The villagers, shocked and fearful, drew aside to let him pass. The older men glanced apprehensively at the brazen heavens above them, half expecting to see them fall in immediate vindication of the offended majesty of God. The young bloods followed Abdul Rahman with their eyes, and in their hearts was a sort of awful admiration. There was courage, independence, freedom, surely, for one who could thus take up arms against High Heaven itself.

Their religion sat lightly enough upon these simple Malayan villagers. They held the whole duty of man to consist in praying—daily at the five appointed hours, weekly at the congregational service in the makeshift mosque or *surau* ; in fasting during the month of Ramathan ; in abstaining from intoxicants and from swine's flesh ; and in being Muhammadans — true believers in Allah and in His Prophet. Naturally, however, no man dreamed of attempting to perform the *whole* of his duty. That would have been an excess of zeal indistinguishable from eccentricity. To refrain from pork and liquor was easy, temptation and opportunity being alike lacking ; fasting was inevitable, since an inherited superstition taught that ill things, of a practical and physical sort, were certain to befall one who broke this portion of the Prophet's law ; but few of the villagers prayed on week-days, the labour passing the measure of their energies, and most of them shirked the Friday service, shamelessly and with dexterity, so often as circumstances admitted. Yet, for all their laxness, these people remained firmly convinced of their own essential sanctity—comfortably secure of ultimate salvation. They knew themselves to be Muhammadans—the special *protégés* of Allah and His Prophet—and they regarded it in some sort as the business of the Deity and His Messenger to see them all safely smuggled into Paradise,—at the worst after a trifling sojourn in Purgatory,—when their time

came. Abdul Rahman, an atheistical ruffian, a Muhammadan who had outgrown his faith, was something new to their inexperience.

A couple of decades earlier, the free-thinker would probably have been lynched, with circumstance and ceremony, while the villagers, filled with a holy joy, thanked the merciful and compassionate God because He had given to them so pleasing and exciting an employment wherewith to break the dull monotony of their days. But now the white men (terrible spoil-sports these) had taken the peace of the land into their keeping, and their presence, which alone had made possible the existence of a professed scoffer, shielded him likewise from the retribution that would, in the natural course, have overwhelmed him. Persecution being, therefore, out of the question, the religiously inclined were obliged to put up with him as best they might; while the young and unthinking members of the community cherished a sneaking admiration for the boldness of the fellow, the originality and independence of his views and phrases, and were not without envy of that freedom from all tiresome trammels and obligations of which, on occasion, he boasted so loudly.

Abdul Rahman was immensely pleased with the sensation which he was causing in the home of his ancestors. He had quitted the village several years earlier, and had fared far since then. He had gone first to Singapore, and thence had shipped as an able seaman upon a succession

of British steam tramps. In the course of his wanderings he had looked upon the pagodas of Burma, the Towers of Silence in Bombay, the Hindu shrines of southern India, the temples and joss-houses of China, the Phallic monuments of Bankok, and upon the domes and spires of Jewish synagogues and Christian churches in half the ports of eastern Asia. At first, as evidences of each new religion forced themselves upon his attention, he had relieved his outraged feelings by vigorous and ostentatious expectoration, and had thanked Allah that he was not as others. Later the minarets of the mosques had begun to stand out in his mind's eye with less conspicuous superiority among the other religious erections that surrounded them. Custom was breeding tolerance, and that is a mental attitude which no Oriental can assume towards alien faiths without danger to that of which he is himself a professor. Very soon tolerance gave birth to indifference, indifference to a sort of lazy doubt, doubt to frank unbelief. Until he had left his village on the banks of the Pahang River, though he had known vaguely that infidels existed, he had not realised them, nor appreciated their numbers or the variety of their cults. His discoveries in the great world into which he had strayed had upset all his preconceived notions. Nowhere did he find his co-religionists ruling the lands in which they dwelt, or even possessing the lion's share of their wealth. Power, position, riches — everything — were in the hands of

infidels; and an understanding of this fact wounded Abdul Rahman's pride of faith. He was not a spiritual-minded person, and to his imagination the good things of this world bulked far bigger than the promise of an after-life. Mammon made a strong appeal to him; Allah seemed very far away—possibly non-existent. Amid such a welter of contending creeds, how should a man feel certainty concerning the identity of the only true religion? When the professors of strange faiths prospered exceedingly, and even the most pious Muslim went to the wall, was not the inference plain that Muhammadanism was not blessed above its fellows? Yet he still spat at the thought of a Jew or an idolater; of so much inherited prejudice nothing could rid him. Therefore, if the faith of Islam dropped from him, he had no inclination to adopt any other religion in its place. He was left without belief in a future life, and with a grim determination to make the most that could be made of the present. He had shed, too, all vestiges of an ethical code, a desire to escape gaol representing the sole restraining influence to which he continued to be subject; and this, supplemented by a considerable share of natural acumen, had stood him in good stead. Before he returned to his village he had garnered a fair stock of worldly goods, and, according to the modest estimates of his fellows, might be reckoned a very rich man.

At first his home-coming had been sheer

delight. The place seemed to him to have shrunk inexplicably since he left it; the huts were smaller and more squalid, the river narrower, the life more primitive and less comfortable than his memory had pictured it. But he had quitted the place when he was still a mere lad, an unconsidered item of the community; he returned to find himself at once the richest and the wisest man in the village. Grave and reverend seniors, who of old had been wont to cuff him mercilessly if he was careless of the kine he was set to herd, bowed down before him and deferred humbly to his opinions. They addressed him as Inche', which is a title of honour, and they tumbled over one another in their anxiety to cadge upon him, and in their eagerness to give him their daughters to wife. When he wove wild romances in which he, the able seaman, figured as the captain of a fleet, and white men — those incomprehensible beings whose ways were to him as an open book— sought his advice and leaned upon his counsel, the assembled villagers drank in his words with an unquestioning belief that was pathetic. For a time he was well pleased with these facile triumphs; and a village in which most of the men looked up to him, and all the women-folk were more or less in love with him, appealed to him as an environment nicely adapted to his requirements.

It was then, in the pride of his recognised superiority over his fellows, that he began little

by little to develop his agnostical opinions, and so for the first time came into acute conflict with public sentiment. He had thought himself strong enough to be able to venture upon any liberty that pleased him ; but nine-tenths of the humility and obsequiousness of the villagers had been due to their ardent desire to make as much out of a rich man as might be. In this laudable endeavour many had failed, and failure had in them engendered bitterness. When Abdul Rahman began to sneer at religion, those who had been disappointed in their expectations felt that they did well to be angry, and that their wrath was sanctified.

Lynching, as has been noted, was accounted in these less spacious days a delight of a vanished and lamented past ; but there were other things the villagers knew, at which a District Officer with a sound understanding of his people might perhaps be disposed to connive. Imam Teh, the Headman,—who was also the priest of the God whom Abdul Rahman affected to slight,—explained this to a number of youths one Thursday evening, and on the following afternoon his words bore fruit. You cannot be a successful lady-killer in a Malayan village—or perhaps anywhere else, for that matter—without incurring the enmity of other men. Abdul Rahman's wealth provided him with better weapons wherewith to reduce the fickle female heart than any of the young bucks of the village could afford. Malay ladies are venal, and they have a keen eye for colour.

Abdul Rahman satisfied both cravings. He was lavish, and he dressed up to the nines. Imam Teh's quiet suggestion offered to the envious youth of the place an opportunity for which the fingers of many youngsters had long been itching.

On Friday afternoon, just as the rest of the male population was coming out of the mosque after the congregational prayers,—there had been on this occasion an unusually full attendance,—Abdul Rahman, clad in gorgeous silks such as are dear to the heart of the Malayan dandy, swaggered past the holy building cocking an insolent eye at the pious crowd. In a second half a dozen youngsters had gripped him, before he had become aware of the faintest threat of danger, and, in spite of his outcries and his struggles, he was carried to the nearest buffalo-wallow, into which he was ignominiously cast. Now a buffalo-wallow is as unpleasant a place in which to lie as can well be conceived. It is generally some three feet deep, and is filled to the brim with rich, liquid slime and other things. The kine lurch down into it with a sound like a volley of pistol-shots, and allow the mud to cover them till only the blunt muzzles and the little savage eyes remain above the surface. When they emerge they are plastered thickly with the clinging slime, and so was poor Abdul Rahman; but he, less fortunate than the beasts, had a full share of the dirt in mouth and nose and eyes and ears. He scrambled out and stood upon the edge of the

wallow, spitting forth slime and curses, and wiping the filth from his eyes with hands that dripped mire. He presented a spectacle at once pitiful and ludicrous, and the humour of the situation was of a kind to appeal forcibly to the spectators. His grotesque appearance was greeted with a chorus of delighted shouts and laughter.

To Abdul Rahman the violence of the shock, the sheer surprise, left him breathless. He had taught himself to regard the villagers with a disdain so deep that it had never occurred to him that they were capable of treating him with aught save reverence and submission. Yet now, without the slightest warning, he found himself standing in their midst covered with mud and ridicule, while they guffawed at him in stupid chorus. Where was the fear, where the admiration which he had fancied that he had inspired in them? It was to him as though a mob of dumb animals had of a sudden risen in rebellion against their master. As he gazed around him, glaring savagely, his eye fell upon the smiling face of Imam Teh, the Headman, and instinctively he understood who had been the instigator of the outrage. Abdul Rahman turned upon the Imam furiously; but it is difficult for a mud-caked man to assume an air of dignity. The grotesqueness of his wrath tickled the villagers to a fresh outburst of delighted laughter.

"'No matter how high the rice-bird may

soar,'" said Imam Teh sweetly, quoting a well-known native proverb, "'in the end he alighteth in a buffalo-wallow!'" And again the villagers yelled. The humbling of pride is ever a delicious thing in the eyes of those who are themselves without hope of, or desire for, change or improvement.

"The law . . . I will have the law, the white man's law, of ye," spluttered Abdul Rahman; but the villagers refused to be dismayed.

"Our *Tuan*," said Imam Teh calmly, referring to the District Officer, "hath little love to waste on those who make trouble in matters religious. It is an old custom here to punish those who will not attend the Friday mosque If many remained away, the prayers would be *battal*—rendered inefficacious—since the congregation of forty men would be short of its tale. The *Tuan*, who knoweth our ways and our laws, will care nothing for thy complaints. Go, Brother, go and sin no more."

Abdul Rahman felt himself to be impotent. It was quite likely that the District Officer would decline to interfere; and in any case, how could he, without loss of self-respect, confess that he had been flung into a buffalo-wallow by the villagers whom he aspired to rule? For Abdul Rahman, who cherished an immense contempt for old Imam Teh, had long ago determined to supplant him in the Headmanship at the first convenient opportunity. Crestfallen and very angry, Abdul Rahman now sneaked away to

his house, seeking unfrequented paths, and avoiding as best he might the amused gaze of the women crowding the doorways. But as he went his mind was working busily, and he was already hatching a scheme which should repay Imam Teh for the insult inflicted, and that with good measure, pressed down and running over.

Abdul Rahman had not travelled in the lands of the white man for nothing. He had learned to appreciate the power of a lie and the value of a lawsuit as weapons of offence in the hands of a man with a knack of engineering things. Witnesses were the only requisite, and witnesses, fortunately for the Oriental litigant, are inexpensive articles to procure in Asia. Abdul Rahman had lent money to several of the villagers; and since these men had no possible means of discharging their liability, he was able to dandle them at the end of a string. In ten days all his preparations were duly made, his witnesses schooled to repeat a carefully concocted story, and instructed how to reply to all the idiotic questions which a white magistrate might, in his folly, be expected to put to them. Never was a case more dexterously fitted together, and Abdul Rahman felt a glow of justifiable pride thrilling him when he thought of the compactness of the lies which he had dovetailed into one another, and which had for their object the undoing of Imam Teh, the Headman.

The story was beautifully simple. When

Abdul Rahman left the village a decade earlier, he had placed a small herd of buffaloes in the keeping of Imam Teh. As a matter of fact, in those indigent days Abdul Rahman had possessed no cattle; but that was not of the slightest consequence. His present wealth would lend *vraisemblance* to the story. Now these mythical kine, it was contended, had been gathered to their fathers, but their progeny composed the herd of five-and-twenty head which Imam Teh was known to possess. Abdul Rahman's witnesses declared that they had themselves delivered the original cattle to the Headman. They remembered every detail connected with the transaction, from the colour of the buffaloes and their distinguishing marks, down to the clothes which all concerned wore upon the occasion of the transfer. They also recalled that Imam Teh had been alone when he accepted charge of the cattle, and that he had solemnly promised that he would keep them for Abdul Rahman, would consider the use to which he might put them as sufficient recompense for his trouble, and that he would hand them and their progeny back to their owner whenever he might return from his wanderings. Such arrangements are very common among Malayan villagers, and the only point to be proved was the existence of the original kine. This Abdul Rahman's witnesses would do past all manner of doubt.

The train being now laid, Abdul Rahman put

a match to it by publicly demanding his buffaloes from Imam Teh. The Headman was completely taken aback, for the claim had, of course, no fragment of foundation; and if his cattle were to be lost to him, he would be a partially ruined man. But he had been a fighter in his youth, and the light of battle was in his eye. Of old a shrewd knife-thrust would have settled the matter finally. To-day law had replaced cold steel. It was a pity, but Imam Teh was a man who knew how to accommodate himself to circumstances. He did not turn a hair, but listened to Abdul Rahman's story with perfect patience, scorning to show by any outward sign that he was moved or troubled. The villagers gathered round with eager interest. This was exciting, they thought, and, in its way, the nearest thing to a fight that the tameness of the present could furnish. But it was disappointing after all. The Imam listened imperturbably; only when Abdul Rahman, having worked himself into a fever of fury, cried out that the law and the witnesses were on his side, the old Headman contented himself with a calm and dignified rejoinder.

"On my side," he said, "abideth Allah and the justice of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!"

Then he turned away and affected not to hear the blasphemous gibe at holy things with which Abdul Rahman greeted the appeal to the justice of God.

Swords had been crossed, and now the fight must be fought to a finish. Abdul Rahman had been a trifle disappointed by the result of this initial encounter. He had hoped to lash the Imam into a fury, and he had failed; but that, after all, mattered little. He would win his case; would rob the Imam, by the help of the white man's law, of the best half of his worldly goods; and having ruined his enemy, would end by supplanting him. What folly it was to prate of Allah and His justice! How could such abstractions avail aught against well-drilled witnesses, a white magistrate's obtuse respect for evidence, and a thoroughly able and adroitly contrived tissue of untruth?

The case came on for hearing in due course, the District Officer inquiring into the matter during his next visit to the village. He held his court on board his house-boat, moored at the foot of the high red bank upon the crest of which the village stood. All the male population of the place crowded down to act as audience, the more fortunate squatting in the sunshine outside the cabin door, others sitting in canoes or on the shelving bank straining their ears to listen. Every soul present knew that Abdul Rahman and his witnesses were perjured to the gullet, and Abdul Rahman was complacently aware that they knew it. The precision of the machinery which he had brought to bear filled him, however, with the pride which belongs to all inventors of notable things; and the village, taken as a whole,

was inclined to share this feeling, and shone contentedly in his reflected glory. Imam Teh, on the other hand, had sought no man's advice and had kept his own counsel. Many had volunteered to bear witness on his behalf, but to all of them he had replied with a single word.

"*Sabar!* Have patience!" he had said; and with that enigmatic phrase his partisans had been forced to content themselves.

The old man knew perfectly well that his all was at stake. The loss of his buffaloes would mean ruin. He might have opposed witness to witness, and have bewildered the magistrate by the clamour of cross-swearing. Had he done so, his position as Headman would have helped him to a favourable verdict, for white men are always suspicious of men of Abdul Rahman's type, who are apt to be more sophisticated and experienced than reliable. But Imam Teh had no wish to win his case by any chance of that kind. He desired certain victory, and his intense faith pointed toward the direction whence victory alone could reach him. He placed his trust in Allah and in the justice of Allah, and he felt a magnificent security.

The District Officer, squatting on his sleeping-mat with a writing-pad upon his knee and a pipe in his mouth, listened patiently to Abdul Rahman and his witnesses as these worthies developed their attack upon the Imam's property, and then turned to the Headman, inquiring what he had to say in reply The old man, who had sat quite

unmoved and silent from the first, shifted his position and spoke.

" The kine are mine own, *Tuan*," he said, " as Abdul Rahman and his witnesses know full well. But I will call no witnesses. Let Allah judge between us. I ask only that Abdul Rahman swear to the truth of his story. Let his witnesses go, *Tuan*"—the men referred to, whose faces had assumed an air of extreme disquiet, as suddenly brightened at the word, a fact which was not lost upon the magistrate. " They be men with wives and little ones, and they have been driven into sin. I do not ask that they be made to swear, lest, swearing falsely, they be devoured by their oaths ; but Abdul Rahman himself, let *him* swear, *Tuan*,—swear in the mosque, the *mimbar*-post in his hands, the Holy Book upon his head,—and if in thirty days he be not devoured by his false oath, the kine shall be his. Allah, *Tuan*, and the justice of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, let these decide. I ask no other arbiter."

" It is well," said the District Officer. " Let Abdul Rahman swear in the mosque with due form and ceremony, and thereafter for the space of one month we will wait to see whether the oath ' eats ' him. At the end of that time I will return and give judgment."

The informal court passed on to the consideration of other matters, and the crowds of interested natives melted away. Abdul Rahman, as he walked homeward, was uplifted, for he now

felt sure that the kine were his, and that the Imam, his enemy, would be undone. Still, he was uneasily conscious that the villagers fell back to let him pass, eyeing him with something of horror in their gaze, and evidently fearful lest chance contact with him might carry with it defilement and misfortune.

On the morrow, Abdul Rahman was solemnly sworn in the mosque in the presence of the entire male population of the place; and for all his scepticism, the ceremony struck him as unpleasantly impressive. He stood there, the centre of his little world, both hands grasping the *mimbar*-post, while the *khatib*, pressing the Kuran against the crown of his head, administered the tremendous oath, calling upon him to repeat it after him, word by word—

"I swear, with the *mimbar*-post between my hands, with the Holy Book upon my head, that the kine were delivered by me to Imam Teh; that the five-and-twenty head of cattle now in his keeping are their offspring; and that the said beasts are mine by right, by promise, and by arrangement. If there be aught that is untrue in these my words, Allah is not my God, Muhammad is not my Teacher, and I pray Allah and His Prophet to strike me and blast me, with sickness and misery in this life, and in the life that is to come to plunge me into the fires of the Terrible Place!"

It seemed to Abdul Rahman that the Holy Book pressed upon his head as a sore burden; that the *mimbar*-post scorched the hands with which he gripped it; that the awful words sounded like a knell, and that the voice which uttered them fell strangely on the ear, breaking into discordant sharps and flats that would not be controlled. He whispered to himself that he had no belief in Allah or in His Prophet; that he cared nought for all this mummery; that mere empty phrases could work him no injury; but in spite of himself something of his old atheistical confidence in his convictions had fallen from him. The solemn words awoke anew within him the superstitions of his childhood—tales, until then forgotten, of the awful fates of men whom false oaths had "devoured" started into recollection. Glancing furtively around, he saw the calm, set face of Imam Teh, with the light of undimmed faith blazing in the deep-sunken eyes; the fixed expression of fear, horror, expectation worn by the assembled villagers; the shudders which shook the men who had lied glibly at his bidding, but who would have gone to their deaths rather than have done the deed which he now was doing.

"*Amin!* So be it!"

The entire congregation took up the shout, as the last words of the oath were pronounced. There was a ring of sure confidence in that appeal to Heaven which shook Abdul Rahman's sense of security rudely.

The *khatib* burst forth in a rolling Arabic prayer, the splendid sonorous words echoing among the rafters of the mosque; and of a sudden the sun was overcast, while a black rain-cloud plunged the world in sombre dusk. A tremor ran through the assembled Malays, and again, the prayer to God concluded, the cry broke forth once more—

"*Amin! Amin!* So be it! So be it!"

The ordeal was at an end, and Abdul Rahman lost no time in quitting the mosque and wending his way homeward. He went alone, for the villagers hung back, no man desiring to rub shoulders with one who was under the ban of Heaven—since all knew that Abdul Rahman had sworn to a lie, and all were now awaiting the catastrophe which surely must befall him in punishment of his crime. As he passed, the doors of huts were closed hastily, children were called in from play by their frightened mothers, and Abdul Rahman was aware of eyes that watched him curiously through the chinks of the wattled walls. He assumed a more truculent swagger than usual; but do what he would, the impression left upon him by the ceremony in the mosque ate deeper and deeper into his spirit.

Before he neared his own house the heavens opened suddenly and let down their deluge of rain. The lightning split the gloom across and across in blinding zigzags, and the thunder crashed with fearful detonations. Abdul Rah-

man broke into a run, and his feet were made swift with a terror that was new to him. It was not only that he wished to avoid the rain. For the first time in his life the lightning made him afraid. In these lands of tropical sun-glare a noontide that is overcast has ever a curiously depressing effect upon the mind, and coming now, when his nerves were already on edge, the storm and the electric battle of the elements set Abdul Rahman tingling from head to foot with weird forebodings of evil. What if he were wrong? What if there were in truth a God in heaven—a God whose majesty he had outraged wantonly? Already the question obtruded itself, and Abdul Rahman, the sceptic, fled before the awful Unknown upon the wings of fear.

He reached his house drenched to the skin, shivering, chilled, miserable; and here a new and far from pleasing surprise awaited him. The place was deserted. His wife and the women who aided her in her work had fled. They knew that their man had sworn to a lie, and, fearful lest they should be engulfed by the doom in store for him, they had sought shelter elsewhere. No fire was burning on the hearth, no cooked food was in readiness for the master's return; the very key of the box, in which a change of clothes was shut away, could not be found until after a prolonged search. Abdul Rahman was very angry, but the fury of the thunderstorm held him a prisoner.

His nerve was not equal to the exploit of braving it again, and he told himself he would make inquiries about his wife when the rain had ceased. In the meantime, he set to work to minister to his own comfort as best he might, starting with the violence of a shying horse at each fresh explosion overhead. By the time he had found the key, unlocked the box, and changed his drenched clothing, Abdul Rahman was chilled to the bone and was shivering like a wet terrier. The thunder rolled away and presently ceased, but the rain held, so all that afternoon Abdul Rahman sat cowering over the fire he had lighted, and had nothing to distract his mind from the one thought which occupied it. Over and over again he re-enacted the scene in the mosque—saw the grave, fixed, horrified faces of the villagers, the triumphant light of certain victory in Imam Teh's eyes, and repeated the awful words of the oath. Already he felt himself to be an outcast—shunned by all his world; and to one who had been wont to impress his will upon others, and to take a leading place in the village, the experience was the reverse of comfortable. There was also a sort of expectancy in the air, an atmosphere of patient and confident waiting, of which he was conscious, and by which he was made supremely uneasy.

The rain fell with pitiless persistency, and Abdul Rahman, upon whose spirit the solitude and the silence, broken only by the monotonous

beat of the downpour upon the thatch, weighed heavily, ate a comfortless meal, and crept under his mosquito-curtains. Sleep, however, came slowly, and then was interrupted by frequent nightmares. His head was hot, his eyes ached in their sockets, he tossed restlessly upon his mat. He had caught a severe chill while searching for his dry clothes, and was in for a dose of fever. In ordinary times he would have recognised this fact, and it would have disquieted him but little; now it filled him with terror and with humiliation. Was he already being "devoured" by the oath? He thrust the bare suggestion from him with an angry scorn, which had in it more of energy and determination than of confidence. He told himself that the idea was absurd, but it obtruded itself upon him no whit less persistently, and with it came another thought. Even if his attack of fever were a mere coincidence—in which light he was resolved to regard it—would not it be otherwise interpreted by the villagers? They would profess to be convinced that the oath was "devouring" him, and Imam Teh would retain his cattle. The thought was gall and wormwood to Abdul Rahman. He *must* keep in good health for thirty days, or all his schemes were rendered futile. If he had the bad luck to fall ill now, everything would be lost—and after all, was it merely luck? As he tossed upon his sleeping-mat he was impressed by the absolute necessity of avoiding illness; and the recognition

of this imperative obligation predisposed him, of course, to hypochondriacal musings of a kind in which he had never before indulged. Fever and the solitude of the night-time completed his discomfiture, and when the slow dawn broke he rose up from his mat haggard, weary, and unrefreshed.

After he had cooked and eaten a meal, he set out for the house of his father-in-law, raging with anger against the wife whose desertion had added so greatly to the miseries of his *nuit blanche*. Again the village drew away its skirts lest they should be sullied by chance contact with the perjurer; again doors were hastily closed at his approach; again he knew himself to be spied upon by innumerable hidden eyes; again he passed solitary and outcast through the crowded place. A consciousness of his own pale face and haggard mien did not add to his self-confidence, and the swagger which he tried to assume was a pitiful thing.

At his father-in-law's house he was met by harsh words and closed doors. The man who had been so eager to give him his daughter to wife, and the brothers-in-law who had played the humble parasite so contentedly, clinked the spear-blades of open hostility at him from behind their defences, and bade him curtly begone, unless he wished that some worse thing should befall him. Until the thirty days were over, they said, his wife could not be restored. The oath must be given its time in which to

"devour" him, and his wife could not risk becoming involved in his fate. Abdul Rahman found that neither bluster nor threats, neither pleadings nor supplications, neither bribes nor promises, were of the least avail. The superstitious fears of a population to whom supernatural things are as real as the happenings of every day were thoroughly aroused, and Abdul Rahman, atheist and perjurer, was doomed to be outcast of all until High Heaven had declared itself for or against him. With a feeling near akin to despair he returned to his own dwelling, knowing all the time that he was being watched with eager curiosity by many invisible eyes. It was not a pleasant sensation, and the long, solitary hours, spent in brooding over his wrongs, which followed, were even less to his liking. Allah seemed suddenly to have become very real—to be standing in the midst of the village world, an awful Figure, sublime in His power and in the wrath of His offended majesty. Abdul Rahman, deserted by his fellows, gripped by fever, angry with all his world, and with nearly the whole of those terrible thirty days stretching away before him in limitless prospect, felt himself to be a worm, very miserable and utterly impotent.

He raged at the thought of the villagers who had once been so servile, and now were unanimous in their desertion of him. He promised himself the pleasure of beating his wife on her return, as woman had never before been beaten; but even this pleasing anticipation could not

relieve the wretchedness of the present. Worst of all, however, was the dead solitude and silence to which he was condemned. It was no comfort to scoff at Allah and His Prophet when none were at hand to hear and to be shocked ; and in the meantime, he was increasingly conscious of a sense of defeat. He was observing his own health with intense anxiety, and the fever won a firmer hold on him in consequence. Was this the finger of Allah, whose existence he had been wont to deny ? The fear gathered force with each passing hour, and the half-forgotten superstitions of his childhood—things which had not troubled him for years—recurred to his memory with persecuting persistency.

As the days crept by he became ill in body and in mind ; for no man of gregarious habits can brood in solitude over his health and his antagonism to religion without suffering. His nerves were all on edge, and the knowledge that the villagers, though they held so resolutely aloof, were watching him narrowly, kept him in a state of acute uneasiness and distress. When he went down to the river for water—he never quitted his hut save under the spur of necessity—the bushes fringing the path were alive with hidden spies. Unseen figures rustled in the underwood, and he heard the shrill, half-suppressed giggles of women, and the whispered comments of men, who noted his haggard air with open satisfaction. As he sat in his doorway, children would creep near to pry at him, and once every day Imam

Teh would walk slowly past, and bend his grave and searching gaze upon him.

In the past his atheism had been a light-hearted thing enough—bred of indifference, and grounded upon nothing in the nature of scientific doubt. But now, of a sudden, he was brought face to face with his unbelief, and was called upon to make a stand-up fight of it with the Deity, whose existence he had been wont so cheerfully to deny. This was an entirely new experience to Abdul Rahman, and in the hour of need his atheism afforded him scant support. Thrown back upon himself, he found the measure of his own impotence; knew himself to be the merest fly upon the wheel; and began to acknowledge, at first almost unconsciously, that he was contending with vast unknown Powers. The bias of his infancy and of his birth, too, asserted itself. The inherited tendency toward belief in things supernatural is something that has a deep root in the Malayan mind. It is not to be eradicated in a moment, or in a single generation. Much solitary brooding caused it to spring up now into a lusty growth; and Abdul Rahman, spent in body and racked of mind, discovered that his atheism, sound enough when all was going well with him, was an unsatisfactory creed in the hour of adversity.

Later came a sneaking acknowledgment that he had never been quite certain that Allah did not exist; and upon this confession followed blank dismay. The words of the oath were

recalled. His own ill-health assumed a portentous meaning. Terror gripped him.

It was just before the dawning of the tenth day that Abdul Rahman arrived at last at conviction. The matter had been in the process of incubation from the moment when the bursting of the thunderstorm had sent him scuttling for shelter with new-born fear in his heart. Every hour of solitary brooding and introspection, every spasm of pain or chill with which the fever had shaken him, every manifestation of his own impotence of which the recognition had been forced upon him, but, above all, the consciousness that the whole village was awaiting with patient but confident expectation the catastrophe which was to befall him, had fostered its growth, and had lent it form and strength. Lying now in the dead darkness, in the chill and cheerless hour before the dawning, when vitality is at its lowest ebb, Abdul Rahman—"Servant of the Merciful One" —saw himself to be a pitiful thing. Through sickness and solitude and fear he had won his way back once more to the old conception of man as an impotent creature, held by an Omnipotent God in the awful hollow of His hand—the conception of man and of his Creator which had been accepted submissively, unquestioningly by countless generations of his forbears. Perhaps the force of inherited tradition, of faith strengthened by the simple belief of those who had transmitted it through the centuries—per-

haps, also, the power which a torturing imagination can, on occasion, exercise—had contributed greatly to Abdul Rahman's conversion ; but the man who had boasted his atheism had come of a sudden into violent collision with the forces that scoff at human control, and in that moment the conviction that man in his impotence must seek an explanation for the inexplicable in something greater than man had forced itself upon his understanding. The Deity whom he had offended stood over against him, and all the ills to which flesh is heir were the lashes of His scourge. In the chill dark of the hour before the dawn Abdul Rahman lay whimpering on his mat like a frightened child, and gave the victory to God.

Old Imam Teh is still Headman in that village, and his herd of buffaloes troops at eventide down to the watering-place with no man to dispute with him its possession. Abdul Rahman has gone to Mecca to lay down the burden of his sins at the Holy Places, and is in a fair way to become a fanatic of the Faith. He will be a glaring exception to the rule if he returns from Arabia a more profitable member of society than was the man who started on the Pilgrimage ; but at any rate he, for the future, will have no manner of doubt as to the nature of an oath.

## X

## THE QUEST OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE

All the wintry afternoon we had been worming our way down the Thames, the big steamer filtering slowly through the throng of crafts like a 'bus moving ponderously amid crowded traffic. When at last we won free of the river, the Channel chop took us on its knee and rocked us roughly, while the scud of wind and rain slapped us in the face with riotous horse-play. As we came up from dinner and struggled aft, our feet slipped and slithered over the wet decks, and the shouts of the frozen Lascars at the look-out reached us through the sopping gloom, despairing as the howls of souls in torment. The ugly, hopeless melancholy of our surroundings accorded well with the mood which possessed the majority of those on board; for we were outward-bound, and men who leave England for the good of their purses carry heavy hearts with them at the start. In the smoking-room, therefore, with coat-collars tugged up about our ears, and hands thrust deeply into our pockets, we sat smoking with mournful earnestness, glaring at our neigh-

bours with the open animosity of the genial Briton.

Through the thickening fog of the tobacco-smoke, the figure of the man seated immediately opposite to me was dimly visible; but presently his unusual appearance claimed my closer attention and aroused my curiosity. His emaciated body was wrapped in a huge ulster, from the up-turned collar of which a head emerged that I can only describe as being like nothing so much as that of a death's-head moth. He was clean-shaven, and his cheeks were as hollow as saucers; his temples were pinched and prominent; from the bottom of deeply sunken sockets little wild eyes glared like savage things held fast in a gin. The mouth was set hard, as though its owner were enduring agony, and trying his best to repress a scream. As much of his hair as his cap and his coat-collar suffered to be seen was of a dirty yellow-white; yet in some indefinable way the man did not give the impression of being old. Rather he seemed to be one prematurely broken; one who suffered acutely and unceasingly; one who, with rigid self-control, maintained a tight grip upon himself, as though all his nerves were on edge. I had marked a somewhat similar expression of concentrated determination upon the faces of fellow-passengers engaged in fighting the demon of sea-sickness; but this man sucked at his pipe, and obviously drew a measure of comfort from it, in a fashion which

showed that he was indifferent to the choppy motion. Yet though those buried eyes of his were glaring and savage—eyes that seemed to be eternally seeking some means of escape from a haunting peril—they were not restless, but rather were fixed in a venomous scowl; while the man himself, dead quiet, save for the light that glinted from them, was apparently sunken in a fathomless abstraction.

All this I noted mechanically, but it was the extraordinary condition of his face that chiefly excited my wonder. It was literally pock-marked with little purple cicatrices, small oblong lumps, smooth and shining feebly in the lamplight, that rose above the surface of the skin, and ran this way and that at every imaginable angle. I had seen more than once the faces of German duellists wonderfully and fearfully beslashed; but the scars they wore were long and clean, wholly unlike the badly healed lumps which disfigured my queer *vis-à-vis*. I fell to speculating as to what could have caused such a multiplicity of wounds: not a gunpowder explosion, certainly, for the skin showed none of the blue tattooing inseparable from injuries so inflicted; nor yet the bursting of a gun, for that always makes at least one large jagged cut, not innumerable tiny scars such as those at which I was looking. I could think of no solution that would fit the case; and as I watched, suddenly the man withdrew his hands from his pockets, waggling

them before his face with a nervous motion, as though he were warding off some invisible assailants. Then I saw that every inch of the backs and palms, and as much of his wrists as were exposed to view, were pitted with cicatrices similar to those with which his face was bedecked.

"Evening, you folk!" said a nasal voice in the doorway, breaking discordantly upon the sulky silence which brooded over us; and I looked up to see the figure of a typical "down-easter," slim and alert, standing just within the room. He had a keen, hard face on him, like a meat-axe, and the wet of the rain stood upon it in drops. He jerked his head at us in collective greeting, walked through the haze of smoke with free gait and swinging shoulders, and threw himself down in a heap on the horse-hair bench beside the man whose strange appearance had riveted my attention. Seated thus, he looked round at us with quick humorous glances, as though our British solemnity, which made each one of us grimly isolated in a crowd, struck him as at once amusing and impossible of endurance.

"Snakes!" he exclaimed genially. "This is *mighty* cheerful!" His strident twang seemed to cut wedges out of the foggy silence. "We look as though we had swallowed a peck of tenpenny nails, and the blamed things were sitting heavy on our stomachs. Come, let us be friendly. I ain't doing any trade in

sore-headed bears. Wake up, sonny!" And he dug his melancholy neighbour in the ribs with an aggressive and outrageous thumb.

It was for all the world as though he had touched the spring that sets in motion the clock-work of a mechanical toy. The man's cap flew from his head,—disclosing a scalp ill covered with sparse hairs and scarred like his face,—as he leaped to his feet with a scream, torn suddenly, as it were, from the depths of his self-absorbed abstraction. Casting quick nervous glances over his shoulder, he backed into the nearest corner, his hands clawing at the air, his eyes hunted, defiant, yet abject. His whole figure was instinct with terror—terror seeking impotently to defend itself against unnumbered enemies. His teeth were set, his gums were drawn back over them in two rigid white lines; a sort of snarling cry broke from him—a cry that seemed to be the expression of furious rage, pain, and agonisingly concentrated effort.

It all took place in a fraction of a second—as quickly as a man jumps when badly startled—and as quickly he recovered his balance, and pulled himself together. Then he cast a murderous glance at the American,—who at that moment presented a picture of petrified astonishment,—let fly a venomous oath at him, and slammed out of the room in a towering rage.

"Goramercy!" ejaculated the American

limply. "I want a drink. Who'll join me?" But no one responded to his invitation.

That was the occasion of my first meeting with Timothy O'Hara; but as I subsequently travelled half across the world in his company, was admitted to his friendship, and heard him relate his experiences, not once but many times, I am able to supply the curious with the key to his extraordinary behaviour that evening. I regret that it is impossible to give his story in his own words, for he told it graphically and with force; but unfortunately his very proper indignation invariably got the better of his discretion, with the result that he frequently waxed blasphemous in the course of his narrative, and at times was rendered altogether inarticulate by rage. However, the version which I now offer to the reader is accurate in all essential details; and my own first-hand knowledge of that gentle race called Muruts, at whose hands O'Hara fared so evilly, has helped me to fill in such blanks as may have existed in the tale as it originally reached me.

A score of years ago there was a man in North Borneo, whose name does not matter—a man who had the itch of travel in him, and loved untrodden places for their own sake. He undertook to explore the interior of the no-man's-land which the Chartered Company euphemistically described as its "property." He made his way inland from the western coast, and little

more was heard of him for several months. At the end of that time a haze of disquieting rumours, as impalpable as the used-up fever-laden wind that blows eternally from the interior, reached the little squalid stations on the seashore ; and shortly afterwards the body of the explorer, terribly mangled and mutilated, was sluiced down-country by a freshet, and brought up on a sand-spit near the mouth of a river on the east coast. Here it was discovered by a couple of white men, who with the aid of a handful of unwilling natives buried it with becoming state, since it was the only thing with a European father and mother which had ever travelled across the centre of North Borneo, from sea to sea, since the beginning of time.

In life the explorer had been noted for his beard, a great yellow cascade of hair which fell down his breast from his lip to his waist ; and when his corpse was found this ornament was missing. The Chartered Company, whose business it was to pay dividends in adverse circumstances, did not profess to be a philanthropical institution, and could not spend its hard-squeezed revenues upon putting the fear of death into people who have made too free with the lives of white folk, as is the practice in other parts of Asia. Therefore no steps were taken by the local administration to punish the Muruts of the interior who had amused themselves by putting the explorer to an ugly death ; but the knowledge that the murdered man's beard had been

shorn from his chin by some truculent savage, and was even then ornamenting the knife-handle of a Murut chief in the heart of the island, rankled in the minds of the white men on the spot. The wise and prudent members of the community talked a great deal, said roundly that the thing was a shame and an abomination, and took care to let their discretion carry them no farther than the spoken word. The young and foolish did not say so much, but the recovery of that wisp of hair became to many of them a tremendous ambition, a dream, something that made even existence in North Borneo tolerable, while it presented itself to their imaginations as a feat possible of accomplishment. With a few this dream became an *idée fixe*, an object in a life that otherwise was unendurable; and it may even have saved a few from the perpetration of more immediate follies. The quest would be the most hazardous conceivable, a fitting enterprise for men rendered desperate by the circumstances into the midst of which fate had thrust them.

Sitting at home in England, with pleasant things to distract the mind all about you, and with nothing at hand more dangerous than a taxi-cab, all this pother concerning the hairs off a dead man's chin may appeal to you as something absurdly sentimental and irrational; but try for the moment to place yourself in the position of an isolated white man at an out-station of North Borneo. Picture to yourself a tumble-down thatched bungalow standing on a

roughly cleared hill, with four Chinese shops and a dilapidated police-station squatting on the bank of a black, creeping river. Rub in a smudge of blue-green forest, shutting you up on flanks, front, and rear. Fill that forest with scattered huts, wherein squalid natives live the lives of beasts—natives whose language you do not know, whose ideas you do not understand, who make their presence felt only by means of savage howls raised by them in their drunken orgies—natives whose hatred of you can only be kept from active expression by such fear as your armed readiness may inspire. Add to this merciless heat, faint exhausted air, an occasional bout of the black fever of the country, and not enough of work to preserve your mind from rust. Remember that the men who are doomed to live in these places get no sport, have no recreations, no companionship; that the long, empty, suffocating days trail by one by one, bringing no hope of change, and that the only communication with the outer world is kept up fitfully by certain dingy steam-tramps which are always behind time, and which may, or may not, arrive once a month. Can you wonder that amid such surroundings men wax melancholy; that they take to brooding over all manner of trivial things in a fashion which is not quite sane; and that the knowledge that their continued existence is dependent upon the wholesome awe in which white folk are held sometimes gets upon their nerves, and makes them feverishly

anxious to vindicate the honour of their race? When you have let the full meaning of these things sink into your minds, you will begin to understand why so much excitement prevailed in North Borneo concerning the reported ownership of the deceased explorer's beard.

Timothy O'Hara and Harold Bateman had lived lives such as those which I have described for half a dozen years or more. They had had ample leisure in which to turn the matter of the explorer's beard over and over in their minds, till the thought of it had bred something like fanaticism—a kind of still, white-hot rage within them. It chanced that their leave of absence fell due upon one and the same day. It followed that they put their heads together and decided to start upon a private raid of their own into the interior of the Murut country, with a view to redeeming the trophy. It also followed that they made their preparations with the utmost secrecy, and that they enlisted a dozen villainous little Dyaks from Sarawak to act as their punitive force. The whole thing was highly improper and very illegal, but it promised adventurous experiences, and both Bateman and O'Hara were young and not over-wise. Also, it must be urged in extenuation of their conduct that they had the effects of some six years' crushing monotony to work off; that they had learned to regard the Muruts of the interior as their natural enemies; and that the ugliness

and the deadly solitude of their existence had rendered them savage, just as the tamest beast becomes wild and ferocious when it finds itself held in the painful grip of a trap.

I am in nowise concerned to justify their doings: my part is to record them. O'Hara and Bateman vanished one day from the last outpost of quasi-civilisation, having given out that they were off up-country in search of big game—which was a fact. Their little expedition slipped into the forest, and the wilderness swallowed it. When once they had pushed out into the unknown interior they were gone past power of recall, were lost as completely as a needle in a ten-acre hay-field; and they breathed more freely because they had escaped from the narrow zone wherein the law of the white man runs, and need guide themselves for the future merely by the dictates of their own rudimentary notions of right and wrong.

They had a very hard time of it, so far as I can gather; for the current of the rivers, which crept towards them, black and oily, from the upper country, was dead against them, and the rapids soon caused them to abandon their boats. Then they tramped it, trudging with dogged perseverance up and down the hills, clambering painfully up sheer ascents, slipping down the steep pitches on the other side, splashing and labouring through the swamps betwixt hill and hill, or wading waist-deep across wildernesses of rank *lalang*-grass, from the green surface of which

the refracted heat smote them under their hat-brims with the force of blows. Aching in every limb, half-blinded by the sweat that trickled into their eyes, flayed by the sun, mired to the ears in the morasses, torn by thorn-thickets, devoured by tree-leeches, stung by all manner of jungle-insects, and oppressed by the weight of self-imposed effort that pride forbade them to abandon, they struggled forward persistently, fiercely, growing more savage and more vindictive at every painful step. The golden fleece of beard, which was the object of their quest, became an oriflamme, in the wake of which they floundered eternally through the inferno of an endless fight. Their determination to recover it became a madness, a possession : it filled their minds to the exclusion of aught else, nerved them to fresh endeavour, spurred them out of their weariness, and would not suffer them to rest. But the bitterness of their travail incensed them mightily against the Murut folk, whose lack of reverence for white men had imposed so tremendous a task upon these self-appointed champions of their race ; and as they sat over their unpalatable meals when the day's toil was ended, they talked together in bloodthirsty fashion of the vengeance they would wreak and the punishment they would exact from the tribe which was discovered to be in possession of the object of their search.

One feature of their march was that prudence forbade a halt. The Murut of North Borneo is

a person of mean understanding, who requires time wherein to set his slow intellect in motion. He is a dipsomaniac, a homicide by training and predilection, and he has a passion for collecting other people's skulls, which is as unscrupulous and as fanatical as that of the modern philatelist. Whenever he encounters a stranger, he immediately falls to coveting that stranger's skull; but as he is a creature of poor courage, it is essential to his comfort that he should win possession of it only by means that will not endanger his own skin. The question as to how such means may be contrived presents a difficult problem for his solution, and it takes his groping mind from two to three days in which to hit upon a workable plan. The explorer, as Bateman and O'Hara were aware, had lost his life because, overcome by fatigue, he had allowed himself to commit the mistake of spending more than a single night under a hospitable Murut roof-tree, and had so given time to his hosts to plot his destruction. Had he only held steadily upon his way, all might have been well with him: for in a country where every village is at enmity with its neighbours, a short march would have carried him into a stranger's land, which he should have been able to quit in its turn ere the schemes for his immolation hatched therein had had time in which to ripen. O'Hara and Bateman, therefore, no matter how worn out they might be by that everlasting, clambering tramp across that cruel

huddle of hill-caps, were rowelled by necessity into pushing forward, and still forward, as surely as the day dawned.

Often the filth and squalor of the long airless huts—each one of which accommodated a whole village community in its dark interior, all the pigs and fowls of the place beneath its flooring, and as many blackened human skulls as could find hanging space along its roof-beams—sickened them, and drove them forth to camp in the jungle. Here there were only wild beasts,—self-respecting and on the whole cleanly beasts, which compared very favourably with the less attractive animals in the village huts,—but a vigilant guard had to be maintained against possible surprise; and this, after a heart-breaking tramp, was hard alike upon white men and Dyaks.

The raiders had pitched their camp in such a place one evening; and as the party lacked meat, and the pigeons could be heard cooing in the tree-tops close at hand, O'Hara took his fowling-piece and strolled off alone into the forest, with the intention of shooting a few birds for the pot. The jungle was very dense in this part of the country—so dense, indeed, that a man was powerless to see in any direction for a distance of more than a dozen yards; but the pigeons were plentiful, and as they fluttered from tree to tree O'Hara walked after them without realising in the least how far he was straying from his starting-point. At last the fast-failing light

arrested his attention, and as he stooped to pick up the last pigeon, the search for which among the brambles had occupied more time than he had fancied, it suddenly struck him that he ought to be returning to the camp, while a doubt as to its exact direction assailed him. He was in the very act of straightening himself again with a view to looking about him for some indication of the path by which he had come when a slight crackle in the underwood smote upon his ear. He remained very still, stooping forward as he was, holding his breath, and listening intently. It flashed through his mind that the sound might have been made by one of the Dyaks, who perhaps had come out of the camp in search of him, and he waited the repetition of the snapping noise with eagerness, hoping that it would tell him whether it were caused by man or beast. As he stood thus for an instant with bowed shoulders, the crackle came again, louder, crisper, and much nearer than before; and at the same moment, before he had time to change his attitude or to realise that danger threatened him, something smote him heavily in the back, bringing him prone to the earth with a grunt. The concussion was caused by some yielding substance, that yet was quick and warm; and the litter of dead leaves and the tangle of underwood combined to break his fall. He was not hurt, therefore, though the breath was knocked out of him, and that unseen something, which tumbled and writhed upon his back, pinned him

to the ground. He skewed his head round, trying to see what had assailed him, and immediately a diabolical face peeped over his shoulder an inch or two above it. He only saw it, as it were, in a flash; but the sight was one which, he was accustomed to say, he would never forget. In after years it was wont to recur to him in dreams, and as surely as it came it woke him with a scream. It was a savage face, brown yet pallid, grimed with dirt and wood ashes, with a narrow retreating forehead, a bestial prognathous snout, and a tiny twitching chin. The little black eyes, fierce and excited, were ringed about by angry red sores, for the eyelashes had been plucked out. The eyebrows also had been removed, but from the upper lip a few coarse wires sprouted uncleanly. The face was split in twain by a set of uneven teeth, pointed like those of a wild cat, and tightly clenched, while above and below them the gums snarled rigidly, bearing witness to the physical effort which their owner was making. The scalp was divided into even halves by a broad parting, on either side of which there rose a tangle of dirty, ill-kept hair, that was drawn back into a chignon, giving to the creature a curious sexless aspect. All these things O'Hara noted in the fraction of a second; and as the horror bred of them set him heaving and fighting as well as his cramped position made possible, a sharp knee-cap was driven into the back of his neck, and his head fell forward with a concussion

that blinded him. For a moment he lay still and inert, and in that moment he was conscious of little deft hands, that flew this way and that, over, under, and around his limbs, and of the pressure of narrow withes, drawn suddenly taut, that ate into his flesh. Up to this time the whole affair had been transacted in a dead, unnatural silence that somehow gave to it the strangeness and unreality of a nightmare ; but now, as O'Hara lay prostrate with his face buried in the underwood, the evensong of the forest insects, which rings through the jungle during the gloaming hour, was suddenly interrupted by an outbreak of queer sounds—by gurgling, jerky speech intermixed with shrill squeakings and whistlings, and by the clicking cackle which stands the Murut folk instead of laughter. Yet even now the voices of his captors were subdued and hushed, as though unwilling to be overheard ; and O'Hara, understanding that the Muruts feared to be interrupted by their victim's friends, made shift to raise a shout, albeit the green stuff forced its way into his mouth and choked his utterance.

Immediately the little nimble hands were busy, clutching him afresh, while the tones of those inhuman voices shrilled and gurgled and clicked more excitedly than before. O'Hara was heaved and tugged, first one way, then another, until finally his body was rolled over on to its back, falling with a dull bump. He shouted once more, putting all the strength

that was in him into the yell, and the nearest Murut promptly stamped on his mouth with his horny heel. O'Hara bit viciously at the thing, but his teeth could make no impression upon its leathery under-surface, and before he could shout again he found himself gagged with a piece of wood, which was bound in its place by a couple of withes. Despair seized him then, and for a moment or two he lay still, with the manhood knocked fairly out of him by a crushing consciousness of impotence, while the gabble of squeak and whistle and grunt, still hushed cautiously, broke out more discordantly than ever.

The withes about his limbs bound O'Hara so cripplingly that only his neck was free to move; but presently, craning it upward, he caught sight of his persecutors for the first time. They formed a squalid group of little, half-starved, wizened creatures, not much larger than most European children of fourteen, but with brutal faces that seemed to bear the weight of whole centuries of care and of animal self-indulgence. They were naked, save for their foul loin-clouts; they were abominably dirty, and their skins were smothered in leprous-looking ringworm; they had not an eyelash or an eyebrow among them, for the hairs had been plucked out by the root; but their scalps were covered by frowsy growths, gathered into loathsome chignons on the napes of their necks. Every man was armed with one or more spears, and from the

waist of each a long knife depended, sheathed in a wooden scabbard hung with tufts of hair. One of them—the man of whose face O'Hara had caught a glimpse above his shoulder—flourished his sheathed knife insistently in his captive's face with grotesque gesticulations, and O'Hara shuddered every time that the disgusting tassels that bedecked the scabbard swept his cheek. The fading daylight was very dim now, enabling O'Hara to see only the *form* of the things by which he was surrounded : *colour* had ceased to have any meaning in those gloomy forest aisles. The grinning savage prancing and gibbering around him, and brandishing that sheathed weapon with its revolting trophies, puzzled him. If he meant murder, why did he not draw his blade? In the depth of his misery the inconsequence of this war-dance furnished O'Hara with an additional torture.

Presently two of the Muruts came suddenly within his field of vision bearing a long green pole. This they proceeded to thrust between O'Hara's flesh and the withes that were entwined about him; and when this had been accomplished, the whole party set their shoulders under the extremities of the pole and lifted their prisoner clear from the ground. Then they bore him off at a sort of jog-trot.

The thongs, tightened fearfully by the pressure thus put upon them, pinched and bruised him pitilessly; his head, lacking all support, hung down in an attitude of dislocation, waggling

this way and that at every jolt ; the blood surged into his brain, causing a horrible vertigo, and seeming to thrust his eyes almost out of their sockets ; he thought that he could *feel* his limbs swelling above the biting grip of the withes, and an irresistible nausea seized him. Maddening cramps tied knots in his every muscle ; and had his journey been of long duration, Timothy O'Hara would never have reached its end alive. Very soon, however, the decreased pace, and the shrill whistling sounds which came from the noses of his Murut bearers, told him that the party was ascending a hill—for these strange folk do not pant like ordinary human beings, and the uncanny noise was familiar to O'Hara from many a toilsome march in the company of native porters. Presently, too, between the straining legs of the leading files O'Hara caught a flying glimpse of distant fire ; and that, he knew, betokened the neighbourhood of a village.

A few minutes later, just as he thought that he was about to lose consciousness, the village was reached—a long, narrow hut, raised on piles, and with a door at either end, from the thresholds of which crazy ladder-ways led to the ground. Up the nearest of these rude staircases the Muruts struggled with their burden, banging his head roughly against each untrimmed rung, and throwing him down on the bamboo flooring with a chorus of grunts. For a moment there was silence, while the entire community gathered

round the white man, staring at him eagerly with a kind of ferocious curiosity. Then with one accord all the men, women, and children present set up a diabolical chorus of whoopings and yellings. They seemed to give themselves over to a veritable insanity of noise. Some, squatting on their heels, supporting the weight of their bodies on arms thrust well behind them, tilted their chins to the roof and howled like maniacs. Others, standing erect, opened their mouths to their full extent, and emitted a series of shrill, blood-curdling bellows. Others, again, shut their eyes, threw their arms aloft, and, concentrating every available atom of energy in the effort, screamed till their voices broke. The ear-piercing din sounded as though all the devils in hell had of a sudden broken loose. Heard from afar, the savage triumph, the diabolical delight that found in it their fitting expression, might well have made the blood run cold in the veins of the bravest; but heard close at hand by the solitary white man whose capture had evoked that hideous outcry, and who knew himself to be utterly at the mercy of these fiends, it was almost enough to unship his reason. O'Hara told me that from that moment he forgot the pain which his bonds occasioned him, forgot even his desire for escape, and was filled with a tremendous longing to be put out of his agony—to be set free by death from this unspeakable inferno. His mind, he said, was working with surprising activity, and "as

though it belonged to somebody else." In a series of flashes he began to recall all that he had ever heard of the manners and customs of the Muruts, of the strange uses to which they put their prisoners; and all the while he was possessed by a kind of restlessness that made him eager for them to do *something*—of no matter how awful a character—that would put a period to his unendurable suspense.

Meanwhile the Muruts were enjoying themselves thoroughly. Great earthenware jars, each sufficiently large to drown a baby with comfort, were already standing round the enclosed verandah which formed the common-room of the village, on to which each family cubicle opened, and to these jars the Muruts—men, women, and children—repeatedly addressed themselves, squatting by them, and sucking up the abominable liquor which filled them through long bamboo tubes. Each toper, as he quitted the jar, fell to howling with redoubled energy; and as more and more of the fiery stuff was consumed, their cries became more savage, more inarticulate, and more diabolical.

Half a dozen men, however, were apparently busy in the performance of some task on a spot just behind O'Hara's head, for though they frequently paid visits of ceremony to the liquor-jars, they always staggered back to the same part of the room when their draughts were ended, and there fell to hacking and hammering at wood with renewed energy. O'Hara was

convinced that they were employed in constructing some infernal instrument of torture; and the impossibility of ascertaining its nature was maddening, and set his imagination picturing every abominable contrivance for the infliction of anguish of which he had ever heard or read. And all the while the hideous orgies, for which his capture was the pretext, were waxing more fast and furious.

Suddenly the hidden group behind him set up a shrill cat-call, and at the sound every Murut in sight leaped to his or her feet, and danced frantically with hideous outcry and maniacal laughter. A moment later a rattan rope whined as it was pulled over the main beam of the roof with something heavy at its end; and as the slack of the cord was made fast to the wall-post opposite to him, O'Hara was aware of some large object, suspended in mid-air, swinging out into the middle of the verandah immediately above him. This, as he craned his neck up at it, struggling to see it more clearly in the uncertain torch-light, was presently revealed as a big cage, an uneven square in shape, the bars of which were some six inches apart, saving on one side, where a wide gap was left. He had barely had time to make this discovery when a mob of Murut men and women rushed at him, cut the bonds that bound him, and mauling him mercilessly, lifted him up, and literally threw him into the opening formed by the gap. The cage rocked crazily, while the

Muruts yelled their delight, and two of their number proceeded hastily to patch up the gap with cross-pieces of wood. Then the whole crowd drew away a little, though the hubbub never slackened, and O'Hara set his teeth to smother the groans which the pain of the removed bonds nearly wrung from him. For the time fear and all other emotions were forgotten in the acuteness of the agony which he endured ; for as the blood began to flow freely once more, every inch of his body seemed to have been transformed into so many raging teeth. His extremities felt soft and flabby,—cold, too, like jellies,—but O'Hara was by nature a very strong man, and at the time of his capture he had been in the pink of condition. In an incredibly short while, therefore, the pain subsided, and he began to regain the use of his cramped limbs.

He was first made aware of his recovered activity by the alacrity with which he bounded into the centre of the cage in obedience to a sharp prick in the back. He tried to rise to his feet, and his head came into stunning contact with the roof ; then, in a crouching attitude, he turned in the direction whence the attack had reached him. What he saw filled him with horror. The leader of the Muruts who had captured him, his eyes bloodshot with drink, was staggering about in front of him with grotesque posturings, waving his knife in one hand and its wooden sheath in the other. It

was the former, evidently, that had administered that painful prod to O'Hara's back, but it was the latter which chained the white man's attention even in that moment of whirling emotions, for from its base depended a long shaggy wisp of sodden yellow hair—the golden fleece of which O'Hara and Bateman were in search. In a flash the savage saw that his victim had recognised the trophy to which he had already been at some pains to direct his attention, and the assembled Muruts gave unmistakable tokens that they all grasped the picturesqueness of the situation. They yelled and howled and bayed more frantically than ever; some of them rolled upon the floor, their limbs and faces contorted by paroxysms of savage merriment, while others staggered about, smiting their fellows on their bare shoulders, squeaking like bats, and clicking like demoralised clockwork. A second prod with a sharp point made O'Hara shy across his narrow cage like a fly-bitten horse, and before he could recover his balance a score of delicately handled weapons inflicted light wounds all over his face and hands. As each knife touched him its owner threw up his head and repeated some formula in a shrill sing-song, no word of which was intelligible to O'Hara save only the name of Kina-Balu—the great mountain which dominates North Borneo, and is believed by the natives to be the eternal resting-place of the spirits which have quitted the life of earth.

Then, for the first time, O'Hara understood what was happening to him. He had often heard of the ceremony known to the wild Muruts as a *bangun*, which has for its object the maintenance of communication between the living and the dead. He had even seen a pig hung up, as he was now hanging, while the tamer Muruts prodded it to death very carefully and slowly, charging it the while with messages for the spirits of the departed ; and he remembered how the abominable cruelty of the proceeding had turned him sick, and had set him longing to interfere with native religious customs in defiance of the prudent Government which he served. Now he was himself to be done to death by inches, just as the pig had died, and he knew that men had spoken truly when they had explained to him that the unfortunate quadruped was only substituted for a nobler victim as a concession to European prejudice, to the great discontent of the tame Muruts.

These thoughts rushed through his mind with the speed of lightning, and all the while it seemed to him that every particle of his mental forces was concentrated upon a single object—the task of defending himself against a crowd of persecutors. Crouching in the centre of the cage, snarling like a cat, with his eyes bursting from their sockets, his every limb braced for a leap in any direction, his hands scrabbling at the air to ward off the stabs, he faced from side to side, his breath coming in quick, noisy pants.

Every second one or another of the points that assailed him made him turn about with a cry of rage, and immediately his exposed back was prodded by every Murut within reach. Suddenly he heard his own voice raised in awful curses and blasphemies, and the familiar tones of his mother-tongue smote him with surprise. He had little consciousness of pain as pain, only the necessity of warding off the points of his enemies' weapons presented itself to him as something that must be accomplished at all costs, and each separate failure enraged him. He bounded about his cage with an energy and an agility that astonished him, and the rocking of his prison seemed to keep time with the lilting of his thumping heart-beats. More than once he fell, and his face and scalp were prodded terribly ere he could regain his feet; often he warded off a thrust with his bare hands. But of the wounds which he thus received he was hardly conscious; his mind was in a species of delirium of rage, and all the time he was torn with a fury of indignation because he, a white man, was being treated in this dishonouring fashion by a pack of despicable Muruts. But he received no serious injury; for the Muruts, who had many messages for their dead relations, were anxious to keep the life in him as long as might be, and in spite of their intoxication, prodded him with shrewdness and caution. How long it all lasted O'Hara never knew with certainty; but it was the exhaustion caused by loss of

breath and blood, and by the wild leaping of that bursting heart of his, that caused him presently to sink on the floor of his cage in a swoon.

Then the Muruts, finding that he did not answer to their stabs, drew off and gathered eagerly around the liquor-jars. The killing would come soon after the dawn,—as soon, in fact, as their overnight orgies made possible,—when the prisoner would be set to run the gauntlet, and would be hacked to pieces after one final, delicious *bangun*. It was essential, therefore, that enough strength should be left in him to enable him to show good sport ; and in the meantime their villainous home-made spirits would bring that measure of happiness which comes to the Murut from being suffered, for a little space, to forget the fact of his own repulsive existence. Accordingly, with noisy hospitality, each man tried to make his neighbours drink to greater excess than himself, and all proved willing victims. With hoots and squeals of laughter, little children were torn from their mothers' breasts and given to suck at the bamboo pipes, their ensuing intoxication being watched with huge merriment by men and women alike. The shouts raised by the revellers became more and more shaky, less and less articulate ; over and over again the groups around the jars broke up, while their members crawled away, to lie about in death-like stupors, from which they roused themselves only to vomit and drink anew.

Long before this stage of the proceedings had been reached, O'Hara had recovered his senses; but prudence bade him lie as still as a mouse. Once or twice a drunken Murut lurched on to his feet and made a pass or two at him, and now and again he was prodded painfully; but, putting forth all the self-control at his command, he gave no sign of life. At last every Murut in the place was sunken in abominable torpor, excepting only the chief, from whose knife-scabbard hung the tuft of hair which had once ornamented the chin of the explorer. His little red eyes were fixed in a drunken glare upon O'Hara, and the latter watched them with a fascination of dread through his half-closed lids. Over and over again the Murut crawled to the nearest liquor-jar, and sucked up the dregs with a horrible sibilant gurgling; and at times he even staggered to his feet, muttering and mumbling over his tiny, busy chin, waving his weapon uncertainly, ere he subsided in a limp heap upon the floor. On each occasion he gave more evident tokens of drowsiness, and at last his blinking eyes were covered by their lashless lids.

At the same moment a gentle gnawing sound, which had been attracting O'Hara's attention for some minutes, though he had not dared to move by so much as a finger's breadth to discover its cause, ceased abruptly. Then the faintest ghost of a whisper came to his ears from below his cage, and, moving with the greatest

caution, and peering down through the uncertain light, he saw that a hole had been made by sawing away two of the laths which formed the flooring. In the black holė immediately beneath him the faces of two of his own Dyaks were framed, and even as he looked one of them hoisted himself into the hut, and began deftly to remove the bars of the cage, working as noiselessly as a shadow. The whole thing was done so silently, and O'Hara's own mind was so racked by the emotions which his recent experiences had held for him, that he was at first persuaded that what he saw, or rather fancied he saw, was merely the figment conjured up for his torture by the delirium which possessed him. He felt that if he suffered himself to believe in this mocking delusion even for an instant, the disappointment of discovering its utter unreality would drive him mad. He was already spent with misery, physical and mental; he was consciously holding himself in leash to prevent the commission of some insane extravagance; he was seized with an unreasoning desire to scream. He fought with himself—a self that was unfamiliar to him, although its identity was never in doubt—as he might have fought with a stranger. He told himself that his senses were playing cruel pranks upon him, and that nothing should induce him to be deceived by them; and all the while hope—mad, wild, hysterical hope—was surging up in his heart, shaking him like an aspen, wringing

unaccustomed tears from his eyes, and tearing his breast with noiseless sobs.

As he lay inert and utterly wretched, unable to bear up manfully under this new wanton torture of the mind, the ghost of the second Dyak clambered skilfully out of the darkness below the hut floor, and joined his fellow, who had already made a wide gap in the side of the cage. Then the two of them seized O'Hara, and with the same strange absence of sound lifted him bodily out of the prison and through the hole in the flooring on to the earth below. Their grip upon his lacerated flesh hurt him acutely; but the very pain was welcome, for did it not prove the reality of his deliverers? What he experienced of relief and gratitude O'Hara could never tell us, for all he remembers is that, gone suddenly weak and plaintive as a child, he clung to the little Dyaks, sobbing broken-heartedly, and weeping on their shoulders without restraint or decency, in an utter *abandon* of self-pity. Also he recalls dimly that centuries later he found himself standing in Bateman's camp, with his people gathering about him, and that of a sudden he was made aware that he was mother-naked. After that, so he avers, all is a blank.

The closing incidents of the story were related to me by Bateman one evening when I chanced to forgather with him in an up-country outpost in Borneo. We had been talking far into the night, and our *solitude à deux* and the

lateness of the hour combined to thaw his usual taciturnity and to unlock his shy confidence. Therefore I was put in possession of a secret which until then, I believe, had been closely kept.

"It was an awful night," he said, "that upon which poor O'Hara was missing. The Dyaks had gone out in couples all over the place to try to pick up his trail, but I remained in the camp; for though there was a little moon, it was too dark for a white man's eyes to be of any good. What with the inactivity, and my fears for O'Hara, I was as 'jumpy' as you make 'em; and as the Dyaks began to drop in, two at a time, each couple bringing their tale of failure, I worked myself up into such a state of depression and misery that I thought I must be going mad. Just about three o'clock in the morning the last brace of Dyaks turned up, and I was all of a shake when I saw that they had poor O'Hara with them. He broke loose from them and stumbled into the centre of the camp, stark naked, and pecked almost to bits by those infernal Murut knives; but the wounds were not over-deep, and the blood was caking over most of them. He was an awful sight, and I was for tending his hurts without delay; but he pushed me roughly aside, and I saw that his eyes were blazing with madness. He stood there in the midst of us all, throwing his arms above his head, cursing in English and in the vernacular, and gesticulating wildly. The

Dyaks edged away from him, and I could see that his condition funked them mortally. I tried again and again to speak to him and calm him, but he would not listen to a word I said, and for full five minutes he stood there raving and ranting, now and again pacing frenziedly from side to side, pouring out a torrent of invective mixed with muddled orders. One of the Dyaks brought him a pair of trousers, and after looking at them as though he had never seen such things before, he put them on, and stood for a second or two staring wildly round him. Then he made a bee-line for a rifle, loaded it, and slung a bandolier across his naked shoulders; and before I could stay him he was marching out of the camp with the whole crowd of Dyaks at his heels.

"I could only follow. I had no fancy for being left alone in that wilderness, more especially just then, and one of the Dyaks told me that he was leading them back to the Murut village. You see I only speak Malay, and as O'Hara had been talking Dyak I had not been able to follow his ravings. Whatever lingo he jabbered, however, it was as plain as a pikestaff that the fellow was mad as a hatter; but I had to stop explaining this to him, for he threatened to shoot me, and the Dyaks would not listen. They clearly thought that he was possessed by a devil, and they would have gone to hell at his bidding while their fear of him was upon them.

" And his madness made him cunning too, for he stalked the Murut den wonderfully neatly, and just as the dawn was breaking we found ourselves posted in the jungle within a few yards of the two doors, which were the only means of entrance or exit for the poor devils in the hut.

" Then O'Hara leaped out of his hiding-place and began yelling like the maniac he was ; and in an instant the whole of that long hut was humming like a disturbed beehive. Three or four squalid creatures showed themselves at the doorway nearest O'Hara, and he greeted them with half the contents of his magazine, and shrieked with laughter as they toppled on to the ground, rolling over and over in their death-agony. There was such a wailing and crying set up by the other inhabitants of the hut as you never heard in all your life,—it was just Despair made vocal,—the sort of outcry that a huge menagerie of wild animals might make when they saw flames lapping at their cages ; and above it all I could hear O'Hara's demoniac laughter ringing with savage delight, and the war-whoops of those little devils of Dyaks, whose blood was fairly up now. The trapped wretches in the hut made a stampede for the farther door : we could hear them scuffling and fighting with one another for the foremost places. They thought that safety lay in that direction ; but the Dyaks were ready for them, and the bullets from their Winchesters drove clean through three and four of the squirming creatures at a time, and in a moment that door-

way too, and the ground about the ladder-foot, were a shambles.

"After that for a space there was a kind of awful lull within the hut, though without O'Hara and his Dyaks capered and yelled. Then the noise which our folk were making was drowned by a series of the most heart-breaking shrieks you ever heard or dreamed of, and immediately a second rush was made simultaneously at each door. The early morning light was getting stronger now, and I remember noting how incongruously peaceful and serene it seemed. Part of the hut near our end had caught fire somehow, and there was a lot of smoke, which hung low about the doorway. Through this I saw the crowd of Muruts struggle in that final rush, and my blood went cold when I understood what they were doing. Every man had a woman or a child held tightly in his arms,—held in front of him as a buckler,—and it was from these poor devils that those awful screams were coming. I jumped in front of the Dyaks and yelled to them in Malay to hold their fire; but O'Hara thrust me aside, and *shooed* the Dyaks on with shouts and curses and peals of laughter, slapping his palm on his gunstock, and capering with delight and excitement. The Dyaks took no sort of heed of me, and the volleys met the Muruts like a wall of lead.

"I had slipped and fallen when O'Hara pushed me, and as I clambered on to my feet again I saw the mob of savages fall together and crumple

up, for all the world as paper crumples when burned suddenly. Most of them fell back into the dark interior of the hut, writhing in convulsions above the litter of dead; but one or two pitched forward headlong to the ground, and I saw a little brown baby, which had escaped unharmed, crawling about over the corpses, and squeaking like a wounded rabbit. I ran forward to save it, but a Dyak was too quick for me, and before I could get near it, he had thrown himself upon it, and . . . *ugh!*

"The Muruts began cutting their way through the flooring then, and trying to bolt into the jungle. One or two of them got away, I think; and this threw O'Hara into such a passion of fury that I half expected to see him kill some of the Dyaks. He tore round to the side of the hut, and I saw him brain one Murut as he made a rush from under the low floor. One end of the building was in roaring flames by this time, and half a dozen of the Dyaks had gone in at the other end and were bolting the wretched creatures from their hiding-places, just as ferrets bolt rabbits from their burrows, while O'Hara and the other Dyaks waited for them outside. They hardly missed one of them, sparing neither age nor sex, though I ran from one to the other like a madman, trying to prevent them. It was awful . . . awful! and I was fairly blubbering with the horror of it, and with the consciousness of my own impotence. I was regularly broken up by it, and I remember at the last sitting down

upon a log, burying my face in my hands, and crying like a child.

"The thing seemed to be over by then: there was no more bolting, and the Dyaks were beginning to clear out of the hut as the flames gained ground and made the place too hot for them. But, at the last, there came a terrific yell from the very heart of the fire, and a single Murut leaped out of the smoke. He was stark naked, for his loin-clout had been burned to tinder; he was blackened by the smoke, and his long hair was afire and waving behind him. His mouth was wide, and the cries that came from it went through and through my head, running up and up the scale till they hit upon a note the shrillness of which agonised me. Surrounded by the flames, he looked like a devil in the heart of the pit. In one scorched arm he brandished a long knife, the blade of which was red with the glare of the flames, and in the other was the sheath, blazing at one end, and decked at the other by a great tuft of yellow hair that was smouldering damply.

"As soon as he saw him O'Hara raised a terrible cry and threw himself at him. The two men grappled and fell, the knife and scabbard escaping from the Murut's grasp and pitching straight into the heart of the fire. The struggle lasted for nearly a minute, O'Hara and his enemy rolling over and over one another, breathing heavily, but making no other sound. Then something happened—I don't know clearly what; but the Murut's head dropped, and O'Hara

rose up from his dead body, moving very stiffly. He stood for a minute or so, looking round him in a dazed fashion, until at last his eyes caught mine. Then he staggered towards me, reeling like a tipsy man.

" 'Mother of Heaven!' he said thickly, 'what have I done? What *have* I done?'

" He stared round him at the little brown corpses, doubled up in dislocated and contorted attitudes, and his eyes were troubled.

" 'God forgive me!' he muttered. 'God forgive me!'

" Then he spun about on his heel, his hands outstretched above his head, his fingers clutching at the air, a thin foam forming on his lips, and before I could reach him he had toppled over in a limp heap upon the ground.

" I had an awful business getting O'Hara down-country. He was as mad as a March hare for three weeks. But the Dyaks worked like bricks—though I could not bear the sight of them —and the currents of the rivers were in our favour when we reached navigable water. I know that O'Hara was mad that morning,—no white man could have acted as he did unless he had been insane,—and he always swears that he has no recollection of anything that occurred after the Dyaks rescued him. I hope it may be so, but I am not certain. He is a changed man anyway, as nervous and jumpy as you make 'em, and I know that he is always brooding over that up-country trip of ours."

" Yes," I assented, " and he is constantly telling the first part of the story to every chance soul he meets."

" Exactly," said Bateman. " That is what makes me sometimes doubt the completeness of his oblivion concerning what followed. What do *you* think ? "

## XI

## THE SKULLS IN THE FOREST

It was some time in the early "nineties" of the last century that Martin Halliday died in the Malay Peninsula of too much tropical Asia. That was not the name which the doctors gave to the disease. They called it "malignant tertian," and appeared to know a surprising number of things about it, except the precise fashion whereby it might be cured — which, after all, was the point of most interest to poor Halliday and to his friends. The doctors and their diagnosis, however, only succeeded in angering the dving man; and his sickness prevented him from keeping a fair hold upon his temper. Latterly, indeed, his language became so improper to the circumstances that the business of nursing him had to be taken out of professional and entrusted to mere lay hands. This duty was performed for him — clumsily enough, I dare say, but with no stinted measure of care and affection—by Jack Norris and Tommy Burton. The latter, poor fellow, pegged out a while back, shot in a border scrimmage; wherefore Norris is

left alone to bear witness concerning the strange case of Martin Halliday.

Martin Halliday was the District Officer in charge of a God-forsaken slip of country lying on the shores of the Straits of Malacca. The coast-lands thereabout were mostly dismal stretches of mangrove-swamp, in which dingy, stunted trees, with boughs gnarled and fantastically distorted, stood ankle-deep in slick, black slime, and foul, tepid water. Through the belt of mud, a few evil-smelling rivers slunk into the sea, staining the Straits with their inky tides ; but here and there the hideous monotony was broken by little patches of yellow beach, set with fringes of *casuarina* trees. The natives of the district were amphibious folk, and their villages consisted for the most part of unsightly huts, strutting crazily on piles, out of reach of the black waters, just within the rivers' mouths. They plied in indolent fashion the trade of fishermen, and their huts reeked with decaying spoils of the sea. There hung about these people and their habitations a perennial dank-ness, suggestive of green mould. Until steam and the white folk came to knock their world awry, their ancestors had been sea-rovers to a man, and had gotten some wealth and many emotions at the expense of their neighbours. But such romance as danger, adventure, and excitement had lent to their lives had long ago been filched from them ; and the fisher-folk of

Martin Halliday's time passed their days amidst surroundings whereof the natural gloom was deepened by the dreary monotony imposed upon them by their alien rulers in the name of law and order. No ship ever touched at any point along that desolate shore. Halliday's infrequent mails filtered down to him from the distant upper-country, where the railway line ran through the big mining settlements; and occasionally a steamer, ploughing her way up or down the Straits of Malacca, passed near enough for her masts to be visible, or for the pin-points of her lights to be glimpsed, pricking through the darkness of the night.

Halliday lived in that district—the only white man within a week's journey—for more months than it is good to count. He used to wander about it, wading through the swamps, or making his way from village to village in a crank canoe,—administering justice and the affairs of his little world in paternal fashion,—himself cut off from his kind almost as utterly as if his home had been made upon an island the route to which was a forgotten secret. In front of him, when he stood upon the scraps of beach, lay the open highway of the sea, over which passed more than half the traffic of eastern Asia; behind him, on the other side of a hedge of dense vegetation, full sixty miles in thickness, was civilisation of a sort —roads and railways, mines and business-houses, seats of government, clubs, ball-rooms, and cricket-grounds; but his own district, stranded

between two streams of restless life, remained remote from all things modern, passed over and forgotten by the centuries.

Before he had done with it, Martin Halliday knew that unsightly tract of coast like the palm of his own hand; and in a fashion he loved it. The hopelessness of ever making anything of it did not affect him. His people clung to their swamps and beaches with a dogged, unambitious patience. They were as inert as some species of marine crustacean welded to its native rock. At first the white man's energy—a quality inexpressibly disgusting to the fisher-folk—was revolted by their indolence: but later Martin himself became attuned to his environment. Time, for him, lost its value. The days and the weeks and the months slid by, and he took no note of them. Insensibly, little by little, he hushed the restlessness of his soul to the rhythm of the slow-creeping rivers, to the deep slumber of the dense swamp-forests. He became content just to live on in the groove into which Fate had fitted him: and since he now contrived to govern without worrying them, his people learned to love him; and the men at the head of the administration, whom he had ceased to pester, left him where he was, and well-nigh forgot the obscure fact of his existence.

The only active pleasure that was his came to him from sharing with the fisher-folk the sport whereby they lived. A long night afloat upon the shoals was a delight that could never pall.

He loved the glory and the immensity of the heavens above him ; the vast expanse of gently heaving sea all around, upon the bosom of which the little boat rocked lazily ; the sense of freedom and of space that he derived from the empty skies and waters. He loved the nearness to inviolate nature, of which at such times he was conscious ; loved, too, the close relationship in which he found himself with an immemorial past, when he thus shared a life that has continued unchanged and unchanging for centuries.

Yet it was through one such night as this, spent upon the fishing banks of the mouth of the Banat River, that his own peace, and that of his district, came to be broken.

The boat, laden with a heavy take, crept into the river, her weary crew tugging ploddingly at the sweeps. In front of her the dawn was breaking in woebegone fashion above that darker smudge against the grey sky, which was the mountains of the interior. Out of the gloom and the vastness of the night she came, the regular creak and plash of rowing breaking on the stillness like the laboured breathing of one spent with travail. Shadowy, she emerged from a world of shadows, and so passed with toil into a ghostly land. The heavens before her were the colour of lead, behind her the colour of ink ; the immensity of the sea, spreading away, lost in the gloom, was felt, not seen ; the tide running

toward her from out the hidden upper-country was a sombre flood, glinting here and there with the cold flash of steel; the sand-spits on either hand were barren patches, sepia-tinted; the forest, mysterious behind a veil of rising mist, reared a precipitous bulk of undefined outline, vague and menacing.

Martin Halliday, worn out with watching, and chilled to the bone by the dawn-wind, squatted on the bamboo decking, and looked out, past the dim forms of the fishermen, bending drowsily above their oars, at this world of neutral tints. The cold, merciless depression bred of fatigue, of the forlorn aspect of inanimate things, and of the early-morning hour, was upon him. Something of strangeness, of mystery,—something indefinably awful and fear-inspiring in the landscape,—gripped his imagination. It was his lot to see Kuala Banat afterwards, many times and in many aspects; yet in the end, it was his impression of this place as he first lighted upon it in the dimness, the melancholy, and the fearfulness of the dawn, that remained with him as its essentially true picture.

The boat came to her moorings alongside a sand-spit soon after the day had fully broken. Huts were improvised; a rude meal was cooked and eaten; and then the tired men lay down to sleep, in defiance of the strengthening light.

When Halliday awoke the sun was already slipping adown the western sky, and his fellows

were busy cooking the evening meal, preparatory to beating up the coast to their village, which was distant over a dozen miles. Leaving them to their work, Halliday, after a dip in the river, took his gun and wandered off into the forest. The woods were noisy with the clamour with which birds and insects greet the approach of evening, but to the white man, somewhat spent with the exertions of the previous night, and heavy still with the slumber from which he had so recently awakened, it seemed as though a great peace brooded over that solitude. In all that jungle there was no trace of human beings—the arch-disturbers of tranquillity: this was the primeval wilderness, a citadel which from the beginning had been held securely against mankind by the forest and the forest creatures—or so it seemed to Martin Halliday.

He came presently to a little open space, from the edge of which the towering trees, hung with countless parasitic draperies, stood back in serried lines. Here a flock of paroquets was feasting joyously upon an invisible swarm of flies, and for a space he paused to watch with a keen yet lazy pleasure. In a kind of mazy dance the little birds—each one of them a flash of gay colours as the soft sunlight touched its plumage—flew back and forth, in and out, weaving wonderful patterns, forming each instant some new, momentary combination of delicate tints against the sombre background of the forest. They were an animated kaleido-

scope, these darting atoms of greens and reds and yellows and purples, passing and repassing with marvellous dexterity in frantic, graceful haste ; now skimming low with incredible speed, again shooting suddenly upward in abrupt ascent to avoid collision with the tree-trunks, only to dive back again in another irresistible swoop. It seemed to Martin that he was standing here, as the first of forest-bred men might have stood, in the heart of a new world,—an untouched woodland,—with Nature for his sole comrade; that here no faintest echo could strike upon his ears of the jarring note which men alone dare to sound even in the hidden sanctuaries of that earth upon which, in the beginning, the Creator, looking, beheld only goodness. The aloofness of the spot from men and from the doings of men was to Martin its supreme attraction. Here at any rate, he thought, even the fisher-folk had refrained from breaking in upon a peace ordained of God. The place where he was standing had never suffered profanation : it had no past, no history ; it was straight from the hand of its Maker—inviolate, undefiled ; containing in itself, as it were, a direct revelation for one who could approach it with due reverence. And then, as these thoughts were passing through his mind, his attention was suddenly attracted by certain unfamiliar objects, half hidden by the undergrowth, surrounding the open space upon which he was looking. He moved forward to investigate them more closely, and the flock of paro-

quets vanished into the tree-tops in a little column-swirl of colour. The brushwood was dense, but beneath it he was presently able to distinguish earthworks, such as could only have been thrown up by the toil of human ants. They were so ancient that they had lost all the appearance of "made" ground, yet they still served to convey more than a hint of what had been. There was about them a certain mathematical precision, a straightness of line, a firmness of the right-angles, a method, a businesslike air, which surely never yet characterised the handiwork of a Malayan people.

Martin Halliday sat down upon the bank that lay upon the seaward side, and looked at that which he had discovered. He had been mistaken, he thought: his notion that this was unvisited, primeval forest was a dream. It came upon him as a revelation, with the force of a shock, that this district of his, with which he had been so long familiar, had a story of its own—an unrecorded past of which he hitherto had caught no hint. What were the events of which this place had been the scene? This plainly had been a fort—a fort held by white men. Its workmanship proved that, beyond all question. Who, he wondered, were the men that built it? What was its history, what the story of its abandonment? The crumbling walls, the silent witnesses of all that had there been enacted, mocked his curiosity while they fired his imagination. The place, utterly for-

gotten, packed away in the wilderness, covered by the green pall of vegetation, fascinated him in an extraordinary fashion. He felt concerning it no mere antiquarian interest : rather he was obsessed by the thought of the individual human beings, white folk like himself, who had been his forerunners in this district, that had seemed his exclusive possession. He was conscious of a feeling of kinship to them, which made them more real to him than the brown men and women with whom he daily consorted. He was surprised by the strength of the attraction which the idea of them exercised over him. It was as though, in some inexplicable way, the souls of these dead-and-gone adventurers were communing direct with his own soul. It was an uncanny, an eerie notion, which filled him with a kind of indefinable dread ; repelling him, as it were, by a sense of close fellowship with the beings of a vague spirit-world whereof the portals had for a moment been left ajar. The rustle of the awakening breeze in the forest around sounded in his ears like the flitting to and fro of unseen ghosts ; the shadows, creeping up through the narrow open spaces between the tree-trunks, were to him as the gathering armies of the dead. With an effort he dragged himself out of the semi-hypnotic stupor into which he had suffered himself to fall, rose to his feet, and turned his back upon the ruined fort. When a few minutes later he stepped out of the forest and rejoined his companions at the edge of the sand-spit, it

seemed to him that he had passed suddenly from a world of wonder into the prosaic life of every-day. He came back to reality with a pang, the intensity of which astonished him.

During the run up the coast to the nearest village Martin Halliday questioned the fisher-men concerning the ruins upon which he had chanced; but they evinced a strange disin-clination to speak of them, or to satisfy his curiosity. They obviously tried to shun the subject, shutting themselves up within the little hard ring of pretended inability to understand, which is the last refuge of the Oriental when pressed in a direction whither he does not desire to tread. Martin felt himself to be baffled, and the original white man stirred in him for the first time for many months, causing the bare fact of opposition, of difficulty, to be in itself stimulating, inciting him to determine upon further investigation. Moreover, the queer fascination which the ruins in the forest had had for him still held him in thrall. He could not rid himself of the thought of the place, of its mystery, its compelling charm.

From that day forth the abiding peace of Halliday's somnolent district was broken. The old fort and its dead-and-gone inhabitants gripped him curiously. He visited the place repeatedly, in spite of the reluctance of his natives to accom-pany him; he talked of it by day, dreamed of it by night; he was for ever attempting to persuade

his people to build a village there,—where surely a village of old had stood,—at the mouth of the Banat River. The fishing-banks at that point were the best upon the coast ; the nearest inhabited spot from which they could be reached was a good dozen miles away. Kuala Banat itself was lovely—sand-spits and glorious forests, a river of clear water, and not a swamp anywhere near at hand to add to the discomfort of life. There were a thousand unanswerable arguments to be advanced in favour of the new settlement ; there was absolutely nothing to be urged against it ; and yet, inexplicably, the natives of the district, usually so easy to lead and to influence, would have nought to do with Halliday's scheme. To all his coaxings they turned a deaf ear. They would give no reasons, but they were obdurate. It was then that Halliday made the discovery that he was by no means so completely a vegetable or an Oriental as he had fondly imagined. He began to develop some distinctively Occidental characteristics—a white man's impatience, a white man's persistence, a white man's energy ; something, too, of a white man's temper ; and the Government, which had so nearly forgotten him, became once more uncomfortably aware of his existence.

For many months he proved himself to be a most inconvenient sort of person to his disillusioned Malays, while he bombarded Head-Quarters with correspondence on the subject of Kuala Banat, and the new settlement which

he was bent upon making in that specially favoured spot. At that moment the Government chanced to be busy hunting the particular hare called "Immigration." Halliday's pet project had therefore the good luck to fall in with the prevailing besetment at Head-Quarters, and accordingly, after the proper number of months had been elaborately wasted in correspondence, thirty families of Trengganu fisher-folk—people from a Native State packed away on the east coast of the Peninsula—were dumped down upon Halliday's shores for the purpose of colonising Kuala Banat. Martin personally conducted the new-comers to the site of his selection, and the next news received from his district told the Government that the entire crowd of immigrants had been blotted out—by plague, it was presumed—and that Halliday himself had been brought round by sea to the nearest port in a dying condition, and to all appearances raving mad. Here he presently died, as has already been related, of "malignant tertian"—or, as I think, of too much tropical Asia.

The bare outline of these facts you may find for yourself, if you know where to look for it, duly enshrined in the files of a certain office; but the rest—the apocryphal, perhaps, but unquestionably the more interesting part of the story—is not so much as hinted at in the official documents. The first inkling of it was got by Jack Norris and Tommy Burton from the lips of

Martin Halliday a little before he died. The detailed account is compiled from the dead man's diaries, supplemented to some extent by a sort of commentary furnished by Pawang Mat Jasin, the medicine-man of Kuala Pulai. Mainly, however, the story comes to us resting on no surer foundation than poor Halliday's unsupported testimony, and fever—if indeed it were fever that killed him, the which he to the end most strenuously denied—is apt to make a man the prey of curious fancies.

The room of the bungalow in which Martin Halliday lay a-dying was bare and comfortless enough. The plank floor was uncarpeted, and the only furniture was the great iron bedstead, with dingy mosquito-curtains looped up irregularly around it, a couple of wooden arm-chairs in which Burton and Norris sat watching, and a small bedside table. The latter was loaded with medicine-bottles ; and some unappetising cold food, which poor Martin could not so much as look at, lay on a plate beside them. The air of the tropical night, oppressively still and empty, was rendered unusually heavy by the smell of disinfectants.

Halliday lay upon the bed, a gaunt figure covered to the waist by a blanket, and for some hours he had been tossing uneasily in a sort of comfortless sleep, while Norris and Burton sat as still as mice, fearing to disturb him by even the slightest movement. They knew that their friend had but a short span of life left to him,

and the act of sitting there hour after hour impotently awaiting the event—watching Death, as it were, creeping upon him inch by inch—had had an unutterably depressing and eerie effect upon their minds. The awful silence, punctuated only by Halliday's uneasy breathing, and by the ticking of distant insects, which seemed to be telling with relentless precision the seconds as they passed, pricked the watchers to restlessness. Their nerves were all on edge. Any rude sound—even a scream of pain—would have come as a positive relief : the tension of the stillness, and of this inevitable waiting for the inevitable, was so acute.

It must have been a couple of hours before the dawn was due when Halliday, who had been moaning in a sort of subdued, heart-broken, panting fashion for some minutes, suddenly fixed upon Norris eyes that blazed with fever, and yet held in them a clear recognition of his identity. Jack and Tommy were both on their feet in a moment, pressing the sick man to taste such nourishment as they had to offer; but he would do no more than barely moisten his parched lips. Then, after a struggle which seemed as though it would rip the life out of him, he began to speak, hurriedly, with a furious, anxious energy, pouring out his words in little jets, as blood pumps from a severed artery. He was obviously possessed by a great dread lest his strength should fail him ere ever he had said his say. At first his friends tried to quiet and

restrain him, bidding him rest; but he became so excited that they had no choice but to let him have his will.

"I must speak," he panted. "I must speak, or I shall never rest in my grave. I have the lives of thirty families upon my conscience as it is—God help me!—and unless I make you understand—force you to believe—make you know the truth—the truth that I alone know—some other fool may do as I did, and I, I—shall be responsible. The natives won't speak—most of them; and if they were to speak, white men wouldn't listen—any more than I did. I wouldn't listen, I wouldn't listen!" The cry rose in a thin wail.

"Promise," he sobbed. "Promise—promise that you will never let anybody try to make a settlement at Kuala Banat! Promise me that! Promise on your words of honour, as you hope to be saved! Say, 'So help me, God!' Say it after me! Quick! Quick!"

To humour him, Norris and Burton took the solemn oath, though they fully believed him to be delirious; and then for a little space he lay back upon his pillows spent and listless, as though his energies were exhausted, as though he could now rest satisfied, his self-imposed task being accomplished. Presently he spoke again, his words coming in a tone of less excitement but in a sort of tense, throaty whisper which was ghastly.

"I ought to tell you why—why I have made you swear, only—I can't—I'm too weak. I

don't want you to think that I—am mad, or raving. Test me. I'm as sane as either of you. Believe it—believe me! Don't put your trust in all that doctors' drivel about fever—and the delirium of fever. I know what I am saying—what I have written—every word of it. And it is truth—God's truth! My diary—you'll find it there—set down from day to day. I tell you it is God's truth, and you shall believe!"

A great cry, a cry as of despair made awfully articulate, went from him—a cry that rings in Norris's ears at times even now. And when in fancy he hears it, there is borne in upon his mind afresh the complete realisation, which came to him in that moment, of the intensity of conviction by which this dying man was possessed. Then against the force of that passionate faith arguments and reason are for the time powerless.

That cry was the last sound which Martin Halliday uttered, for he straightway fell into a stupor from which he never returned to consciousness.

The examination of his papers was a task which fell to the lot of the friends who had nursed him. They also wrote the usual melancholy letters to his people at Home, softening down, as was fitting, the ugly circumstances from the midst of which death had taken him; for why should they insist unnecessarily upon the bare and loveless bungalow, the dingy mosquito-curtains, the wrangles with the doctor-

folk, and all the rest of it? An account of any death which occurs upon the outskirts usually requires a world of careful editing before ever it can be made suitable for Home consumption. On occasions such as this a dead man's friends have always to reconcile their consciences to a certain amount of necessary insincerity, out of regard for the distant hearts that loved him; but in the case of Martin Halliday, his two more or less self-appointed executors assumed a rather unusually heavy responsibility. After they had together examined the diary of which Martin had spoken on his death-bed, they came to the decision that, for the time at any rate, it must be suppressed. They had a care for their friend's memory, and they knew that an unimaginative Government, supported by its medical advisers, would unhesitatingly declare in cold-blooded fashion that Halliday had been suffering from acute dementia. His relatives in England, on the other hand, would be even less likely to understand. A study of the diary could only produce pain and distress in the minds of those who had loved Martin Halliday; in those who had not known or cared for him, it might breed derision. For the dead man's sake, therefore, the thing must be abstracted from his effects—and abstracted it accordingly was.

None the less, Jack Norris has made it his business, in as unobtrusive and effectual a manner as possible, to see that Halliday's dying wishes shall be respected, and that no new

settlement shall ever again be established at Kuala Banat. Precisely how he contrived to work it is a trade secret concerning which I had best be silent; but he has succeeded in getting the place medically condemned, which means that it is "officially" uninhabitable for all time. He would hardly have taken such action as this had he not believed more than a little in the reality of Halliday's experiences. He declines to talk about the matter, however, and the most that I could ever drag from him was the hope that the dead man would now "rest in his grave."

During the months of delay which supervened before poor Halliday's project for the settlement of Kuala Banat had been "put through," as he phrases it in his diary, the ruined fort which he had discovered seems to have obsessed him. Again and again he revisited it—went out of his way to make objectless excursions to it. There was nothing to take him to the place, for his own natives had shown themselves to be strongly averse from all idea of colonising it, and for a season the immigration project hung fire most disappointingly. When he got there, he had not anything to do. The jungles held no game worth shooting, the fishing-banks could only be worked at night-times: he was not even impelled by antiquarian interest to attempt excavations or to search for relics of the past. Yet he was drawn to the old fort, as it were, by some

irresistible force; was restless and uneasy when at a distance from it; and yet not satisfied when he had reached this Mecca of his many pilgrimages. He passed hours sitting idly upon one or another of the crumbling earthworks, dreaming and musing, straining his ears to catch the whisper of a bygone age; and when with the sunset his natives clamoured to depart, he would tear himself away with a conscious effort, and with the unreasoning longing to return already quickening within him. The Malays of the district, upon whom in most things he was wont to impose his will, would never consent to spend a night at Kuala Banat, and Martin Halliday noted half-wonderingly that he had "a sort of hungry craving" to see the old fort by moonlight.

His enthusiasm for the place finds frequent expression in his diary: he goes into rhapsodies over its beauty. "Kuala Banat," he writes, "is out and away the most lovely spot in the whole district—a river of limpid water, sand-spits yellow as a buttercup, and then forest—great towering banks of forest reared up on every side to any height you like—forest infinitely old, that looks down upon you in a sort of scorn from the magnificence of all its supreme mystery. It is like the stars, 'with power to burn and brand his nothingness into man.' It has got a queer grip upon me, this place: it seizes my imagination—I can't win free of it. How often I stand looking at those huge, silent

trees, and long for them to have voices where-with to speak, that they might tell me of the sights which they have seen—the tragedy of that abandoned fort, of this deserted fairyland. For there *must* have been a tragedy—I know it, I feel it. This place of all places could never have been forsaken by men unless they had been driven out of it, driven, *driven*. What was it, I wonder—pestilence, famine, war? At times I fancy that I am on the very brink of discovering the secret, though how and whence I do not know. Yet I can do nothing to hasten it: I can only sit and wait—for what? It is as though I were listening, straining my hearing; and as if, were my senses more acute, I should learn all without moving a finger. What non-sense it sounds, now that the words are written here in black and white; yet that is what I feel, and I can only sit still and wait."

"Every time I come back here," he writes on another occasion, "the influence of the place, the fascination of it, grows stronger. I have had the strangest sensations about it from the start—I can't describe them. It was at first as though something in me fought hard to hold me back, to keep me away from Kuala Banat; while something else—something apart from me—drew me to return again and again. Though I love the place, it was not all pleasure in the beginning. There was a sort of horror in it too—the kind of feeling that you have when you go into danger; hating it, going against your

will, but going all the same because you can't help yourself, can't resist it—because it compels you, fascinates while it terrifies you. Every man, I fancy, has experienced something of the sort in greater or in less measure ; but with me it is unreasoning, causeless, meaningless, and yet is so insistent, so irresistible, that it will not let me rest. When I am away from the place, I am uneasy—all on edge. I feel as though something were lacking to me : yet when I am back there again I am still unsatisfied, still restless, still listening with painful intentness for some sound that I cannot catch, some word of revelation that I cannot hear or understand."

It is curious to contrast passages such as these with the dull official prose of Halliday's reports, written at the same time, with the object of inducing the Government to adopt his scheme for the founding of a fishing-colony at Kuala Banat, and it is difficult to believe that the two were the work of the same man. In the official papers the arguments for the settlement are marshalled with care, and there are no traces of anything more than the subdued enthusiasm of the ordinary District Officer playing the advocate for his pet project. In the diary, however, we are brought into contact with quite a different being. It is no longer the machine-made civilian who speaks, but a man of a curiously introspective, even morbid, tendency—the prey of strange fancies, of inconsequent prepossessions. Even

the diary is mainly filled by a dull record of duty, the monotony of which is only broken by occasional "purple patches" of almost hysterical prose, inspired invariably by the thought of Kuala Banat, and by half-mystical musings concerning the sensations with which the place inspired him. Of these I have now quoted enough, and the remainder of the story must tell itself as best it may without more than an occasional reference to the sources whence it is derived.

One glorious day Martin Halliday saw the culmination of his desires. Thirty families of Trengganu folk were landed from a Government launch at Kuala Pulai, distant a dozen miles or so from Kuala Banat; and as soon as she was quit of her passengers, the little craft which had brought them fussed away down the coast. Halliday had collected a number of sailing-boats in which to convey the settlers and their gear to their destination, and no sooner had they been set ashore than he was in a fever to be gone. He knew that the natives of the district regarded Kuala Banat with superstitious awe, and he was in deadly fear lest aught should be said by them that might awaken the prejudice of the Trengganu people. As a matter of fact, he need not have worried himself upon this score. The Malays of Kuala Pulai were probably quite convinced of certain facts, and entertained no sort of doubt as to what awaited the Trengganu folk at Kuala Banat: but they did not care.

The new-comers did not belong to the district; though they spoke the same language, professed the same religion, were of the same colour as the villagers of Kuala Pulai, they were strangers, to whom the natives of the place were bound by no ties of consanguinity or interest. Therefore, their fate, be it ugly or fortunate, was a matter of supreme indifference. The Pulai people just let them go—never said a word of warning or dissuasion, never so much as lifted a finger to stay them. It would be unjust to impute much blame. Martin Halliday was known to be a resolute fellow; his heart was set upon this project. If the immigrants were scared away by any old-wives' tales, he would certainly make it hot for whoever was responsible. The curious thing is, however, that I am convinced that this aspect of the position had no great influence in determining the action of the Kuala Pulai Malays. They simply did not care—did not think the Trengganu people worth troubling about. There you have the Oriental—his extraordinary indifference, his total lack of sympathy for those who are not connected with him. If the same circumstances could repeat themselves in Europe—which, of course, is sheer extravagant impossibility—every soul in the place would have warned the Trengganu natives, and Halliday's scheme would have died still-born. As it was, the thing went forward without a hitch.

Martin himself occupied a somewhat different position from that of the immigrants in the

estimation of the district. His was a familiar figure in every village, almost in every house. His people had got used to him, knew where to have him, knew the best and the worst of him, were secure in his ability to understand them and their needs. If aught should happen to him, some new white man would be let loose among them, and the gods alone could say what manner of creature the stranger might be. Accordingly, through its mouthpiece, old Pawang Mat Jasin of Kuala Pulai, the district spoke to Martin Halliday, and Martin thought to convict the district, in the person of the medicine-man, of incipient insanity.

The old fellow came to Martin by night on the eve of his departure for Kuala Banat, and pleaded with him earnestly to abandon the scheme. At first he talked soberly enough, though he was far from explicit upon the subject of his fears ; but when he found that his words were making no impression, he worked himself up into a wild state of excitement, threw himself upon the floor at the white man's feet, imploring him with the passionate energy of one who prays for his life, weeping and threatening through his tears. Halliday could make nothing of it. He tried to drive it into the old fellow's understanding that a project which had been approved by Head-Quarters could not be abandoned incontinently and without sufficient reason ; but the Pawang was impervious to argument. The calamity, as he termed it, had

not yet befallen; therefore it could still be avoided. To him Halliday, its visible embodiment, was the Government. He either could not or would not grasp the idea of the impersonal organism at the back of the District Officer. To his thinking, the decision rested with the white man: matters could not have gone too far, could not have passed out of his hands. There must still be a means of retreat at his command. So he pleaded and wept, raved like a lunatic, and at last poured forth a volume of inarticulate, nebulous threats.

Halliday was dazed by the old man's excitement. Had he not been familiar with the habits of this Muhammadan peasant, he would have been tempted to fancy that he had been drinking. Knowing that the Pawang had never tasted intoxicating liquor in his life, however, Halliday was unable to find a working explanation in any such hypothesis, and his acquaintance with Malayan character quickened his anxieties. He feared that the old fellow might be on the brink of one of those nervous outbreaks which, with his countrymen, are apt to culminate in *amok*-running; and he felt convinced that such a catastrophe could only be averted by keeping the Pawang under his eye, by gripping the soul of him in the vice of a stronger nature, and holding it fast until the paroxysm had worn itself out.

Halliday accordingly invited the medicine-man to accompany him to Kuala Banat; and

though at first the bare idea appeared to fill him with panic, the Pawang in the end consented, provided that he should be free to quit the place when and how he pleased. This condition Halliday accepted, and when his little fleet set sail from Kuala Pulai, Pawang Mat Jasin, alone among the natives of the district, took passage on board the white man's boat; sitting huddled up in the stern, mumbling prayers and incantations against evil, quaking and chattering with superstitious fears, and now and again shivering violently like a wet terrier. He did not present an encouraging spectacle, but Halliday was immensely relieved at having him with him, for the peace of his district is a thing very precious to the officer in charge of it, and it seemed to Martin that, left to his own devices, the Pawang, in his uncanny state of excitement, might have gone near to breaking it.

To Martin Halliday's fascinated gaze Kuala Banat was looking more beautiful than ever as his little string of sailing-crafts trailed into the mouth of the river under the soft sunshine of the afternoon. Far down the side of a dome of marvellous colour the sun was sinking on to a bed of fleecy purple clouds ; in the heavens, a vivid ethereal green melted imperceptibly into a pure blue above the roseate tints which dyed the western sky ; the reflection of the sunset—a mellow and chastened glory—caused the inland range of mountains to stand out prominent and

incredibly distinct, solid wave-crests of cobalt. Below the line of hills, in the immediate foreground, the forest rose abruptly, every shade of green intensified and vivified by the evening light; below it again, on either hand, the yellow sand-banks opened a gate through which the river, gleaming redly, its waters alive with motion, poured its silent tide. With much shouting, the creaking of rattan cables, and the grinding of anchors upon the shingles, the boats were made fast. The splendour faded from the sky; the night shut down like a black curtain, rent here and there by the red flame of cooking-fires. Then the moon arose, and a glamour as of a fairy world was shed over the scene.

The natives, worn out by the labours of the day and the heat, ate their meal of rice and fish, and snuggled down to sleep on board the boats; but far into the night Martin Halliday sat and mused. He had dreamed a dream, and behold it was coming true. It was to be his lot to people this lovely wilderness as it had once before been peopled—how long ago he could only guess. He looked at shore and river with a sense of proud and fond proprietorship. It was his, *his*, as was no other spot on all God's glorious earth, and he would make of it what he would. Waking he dreamed, and so passed into a tranquil sleep.

On the morrow the work of establishing a village was begun in real earnest, and the Trengganu folk—a handy race when it comes to

the use of tools—proved that they had higher standards of architecture and comfort than were commonly possessed by the natives of Halliday's district. The huts when finished promised to be quite superior things of their kind, and while they were building the settlers slept quite contentedly on board their boats. The Banat fishing-banks, too, yielded better takes than even Halliday had anticipated, and matters appeared to be going so well that he fell to chaffing the Pawang, who continued to be as fearful, as morose, and as uneasy as ever.

"We have not yet gone up on to the land to live, *Tuan*," the old man said. "We dwell in our boats. Let us not sound the war-cry of triumph before the assault hath begun."

"We are ashore all day," objected Halliday.

"Ay," croaked the Pawang, "and afloat all night. Wait, *Tuan*, wait. Oh, quit this accursed place, even now, even now!"

"Rot!" said Martin to himself, and he jeered the Pawang anew. The old man said no more, but he was not amused.

On the third day, when Martin was out with a party of Trengganu folk cutting timber for the village, chance took him in the direction of the old fort. He had visited it many times since his arrival—had wasted there in dreamy inaction and solitude more hours than he cared to reckon up; but his people had never had occasion to cut posts in this particular locality. Now, as they were clearing the underwood

around the roots of a big tree which they designed to fell, they lighted suddenly upon some curious objects. They were three human skulls lying in a regular row upon the surface of the ground. The Malays, who dislike such things, would not touch them; but Martin was interested, and he examined them closely. It was with a curious feeling of anger in his heart that he made the discovery that they must once have been set upon the shoulders of white folk like himself—the shape was unmistakable, he could not be deceived. One, moreover, must have belonged to a child; one to a woman; and one, the largest, to a man. The latter had been broken by a blow which had crashed through the bone at the back; the other two were intact.

The facts thus revealed smote him with a shock. Those three grim bone-faces, gazing at him out of hollow eye-sockets, with fixed expressions whereof the very immobile rigidity impressed him with a sense of their implacable hate, appealed to him with extraordinary force as he realised that they were the relics of fellow-Europeans, and that one of them—the strongest—had died a death of violence. They seemed to him to be very near akin to him: he recognised the bond of a common humanity, which was different from the brown humanity of the natives around him; of a common faith, a common tradition and history. Though they were separated from him by centuries of time; though the names they had borne in life—nay, the

very race to which they had belonged—were unknown to him ; though in every way these dead folk were infinitely more remote from him than were the living men and women—the Malays—among whom he had sojourned so long ; still they seemed to *claim* him as one of themselves—as a friend, an ally. The thought of them—the notion that they had been killed here, alone in the wilderness, beset by merciless enemies—moved him strangely. Was it the white blood, the colour-prejudice,—which will survive all shedding of preconceived opinions, years passed in closest fellowship with men of a lesser breed,—that suddenly was stirring within him ? He could not tell ; but the sentiment was there, strong and wrathful—a feeling of anger at the death which had befallen these strangers, a fierce hatred of their murderers, a burning desire to see them avenged. He told himself that his attitude of mind was absurd, illogical ; but the feeling was there, refused to be driven forth. It gripped him with a force that would not be denied.

Added to this also was another sensation—uncanny, eerie; felt, yet dimly realised. It was as though these dead folk had been *waiting* for him, and he for them ; as though, from the first, they had put forth the attraction which had drawn him so irresistibly to the spot—the uneasy sense of being impelled to visit and revisit it, of which he had been conscious. The discovery of the unburied Christian skulls

appeared to indicate at last the nature of the "something required of him" of which he had been vaguely aware. He was amazed by the notion, yet it none the less appealed to him with the force of certainty—they desired Christian burial, and in some occult fashion they had been able to communicate their will to him. It was an idea fantastic, absurd, in this prosaic age, at the end of the nineteenth century; yet out here in the wilderness it contrived to wear a garb of probability.

Solemnly he committed the skulls to the earth, repeating over them such fragments of the Burial Service as he could remember, and long he sat beside the grave which he had dug and filled, pondering with quickened interest over the lost story of this man and woman and child. The chance which had revealed the skulls to him seemed to bring the forgotten tragedy of the deserted fort very near to him. More than ever he longed to know the details of its fall and its abandonment, of the lives and the deaths of the men who had held it; and it seemed to him that, though he had now performed the last duty to the dead, the odd sense that something more was required of him clung as insistently as of old, and now with a threefold force.

That night Martin Halliday awoke long before the dawn was due, aroused into the wide-eyed wakefulness which means that sleep has gone, not to return for many hours. He sat up under the palm-leaf shelter, beneath which his

mat was spread, in the stern of the boat, and gazed out into the serene stillness of the night. The moon was shedding its soft, illusive glamour over forest and river, giving to the scene the lovely unreality of a theatrical display. Not a breath of wind was stirring ; no sound of bird or insect came from the sleeping woodland ; the silence reigned as though it were too holy to be broken ; there was a magic in it that was unearthly by reason of its tremendous solemnity.

Suddenly it occurred to Martin how often he had wished to see the old fort by moonlight, and the "sick longing," which he had noted in his diary with a certain sense of surprise at its unaccountable force, cried out to be satisfied. Noiselessly he slipped on his shoes, clambered over the side, tight-roped along a treacherous bamboo gangway, and so stepped ashore. The deep black shadows lay under the canopy of forest-branches to all seeming as solid as the tree-trunks, baffling the eye with a thousand illusions of barrier and obstacle ; but the path to the old fort was one with which Halliday was now familiar through long use, and he had no difficulty in finding his way. He came presently to the little opening in which he had once seen the paroquets feasting on the swarm of flies ; and as he did so, the little fox-terrier, which unnoticed had been following at his heels, whined suddenly and bolted for the boats, its tail tight-pressed between its legs. Martin wheeled about, thinking that a snake had stricken the dog ; but nothing

moved in the underwood. He called and whistled, but the terrier only scuttled the faster. Martin could hear in the stillness the hurried beat of its little pads. He called the dog's name again, then hushed his voice. There seemed a profanation in thus raising an outcry in the silence of the forest and the night.

Halliday faced the fort once more and stepped out into the little clearing, moving cautiously, for the dog's desertion made him fearful lest some beast of prey should be near at hand. He snuffed the air, half expecting to smell the strong scent—like that which might be given off by a whole pack of foxes—which is the sure indication of a tiger's presence; but the air was untainted, laden only with the heavy fragrance of the forest. Reassured, he moved on, then came to an abrupt standstill. In front of him, near the middle of the fort, above the spot where on the preceding afternoon he had buried the relics of the dead, three white objects lay upon the ground. They were the skulls, ranged in an ordered row just as they had been when first he had seen them. The sight of them bewildered him. Who had disinterred them? was his first thought. But then he remembered that no man among his Malays would willingly have touched them when unburied, far less have disturbed them when decently covered by the earth. Some forest creature, then? But the explanation carried with it no conviction. The beasts of the jungle have scant use for bones which have lain

exposed to the weather for years, perhaps for centuries. None the less, though in his heart he knew that the search was vain, he examined the ground diligently for tracks; but nothing of the kind could he discover. The skulls seemed to have been drawn upward through the soil, which had collapsed upon itself. Above it they lay, glaring through sightless eye-sockets, their uneven teeth grinning fixedly over the places where the missing lower jawbones had once hung. As Martin gazed at them in a sort of paroxysm of horror, they seemed to be instinct with that uncanny air of expectation, of *waiting*, patiently but inexorably, for—he knew not what; for something that they demanded of him—something that he must do.

The awful loneliness of the place gripped him suddenly with a chill dread. He longed to turn and run, even as the dog had fled the spot, but he was powerless to move. It was as though he were riveted to the ground; and he stood there, with his gaze nailed to the three white objects which the moonlight revealed so clearly. He experienced the queer sensation which comes to a man when he fixes his eyes immovably for too long a time upon some bright point till he feels his body, as it were, falling away from him, and the soul, of whose existence he is rarely conscious in an active degree, forcing its way out of its shell. The skulls were hypnotising him.

How long he stood there he did not know, nor

had he any memory at a later time of what thereafter befell him, nor of how he made his way back to his sleeping mat on board the fishing-boat. When he awoke, that night-wandering appealed to his recollection as a thing of utter unreality—part of the tangled and vivid dreams that had oppressed him sleeping. He did not believe that he had left his mat, till he found his shoes still upon his feet. He did not believe in the skulls having become exhumed, seemingly unaided, until he stood once more in the little clearing looking down at them. Then, though the fresh, glad daylight flooded the forest all around him, his heart stood still with superstitious fear, and the sweat that broke out upon his forehead was clammy cold.

With head depressed, he walked back to his boat, trying the while to disentangle his recollections, to winnow out the reality from the dreams. Up to the time that he had discovered the skulls, rejected, apparently, by the earth in which he had laid them, he had been awake. So much was proved: but afterwards. . . . There was in his mind a space blank of recollections of an actual sort, but crowded strangely with dream-sensations. He remembered standing on the seashore—but was it *he* who had stood there?—standing in the fading light of afternoon, gazing with strained and anxious eyes in the direction of Malacca. He remembered that as he stood there he crossed himself repeatedly, as he had seen men do in con-

tinental churches, and muttered fragments of Latin prayer. He recalled that even at the time he had wondered vaguely, as men wonder in dreams, how and when he had learned these *Paters* and *Aves* that now arose so glibly to his lips. He remembered that there had been despair in his heart; that the empty horizon to the south had been to him like heavens of brass to which men lift impotent hands in entreaty addressed to ears that will not hear.

He remembered turning away, with sigh and groan and prayer and curse all breaking from his lips, and passing back towards the fort. When he caught sight of it, it was to him at once strange and familiar—strange to him, Martin Halliday, but familiar to that other self which had in some inexplicable fashion entered into possession of his body. The fort was not as he had seen it in his waking hours, for it wore a strange air of life and of occupation. A high new stockade crowned its walls; the earth of its trenches was red from the spade and barely coated with fresh green weeds; smoke curled upward from the roof of a hut within the defences. It was the same place as that which was now so well known to Martin Halliday, and yet it was so different as almost to defy recognition. Recalling its every detail now that he was in truth awake, Halliday had much ado to convince himself that he had not really looked upon it—the memory was so vivid, so real, so exact to its last

least feature. Yet to that other self within him the sight, so intimately familiar, had had, Halliday felt through some subtle intuition, an unusual, an alarming aspect. He caught himself standing still; noted that his hand was clutching at his heart, as though to still its beating; that it flew thence to his throat, as though his arrested breath were choking him. An instant later he was rushing madly towards the little crooked door which gave access to the fort. The place was deserted. He heard himself calling in some strange and yet familiar tongue, and at the last a feeble cry answered to his agonised appeals. Blind with horror and rage, he forced his way through the entrance to the hut, the door, wrenched from its hinges and hanging by its bolts, obstructing his movements. The darkness was gathering fast by now, and for a moment his eyes were useless to him in the obscurity of the hut; but he was conscious of a fitful plucking at his feet, and presently, stooping earthward, his hand touched something that winced and moved, something that was wet with a fluid warm and sticky.

He recalled searching for a flint and steel; remembered wondering why matches were not forthcoming; remembered, too, admiring the dexterity of that other self which, in spite of hands smitten by a sudden palsy, manipulated the clumsy fire-maker so deftly. Soon a *damar* torch flared up, and the flame revealed the forms of a woman and a child—Europeans

these, but clad strangely, after the forgotten fashion of some bygone age—lying upon the floor in pools of blood. Martin Halliday waking took in again in retrospect every hideous detail of that scene,—it was printed in fire across his brain,—and once again he was seized by a wild whirl of savagery and passion. First, he remembered, he had flung himself down by the side of that slaughtered mother and child, weeping hysterically, seeking to coax the life back into the murdered woman, striving vainly to stay the ebb of the child's vitality. He remembered praying and cursing, entreating and threatening all in a breath—all in that unknown tongue that yet was for him so full of meaning; remembered lying still, spent and impotent, in a kind of numbed stupor; remembered rising up at the last with grim determination to avenge.

He recalled passing out into the moonlight and standing there for an instant oppressed by the unreality of things familiar. He remembered throwing his arms aloft, his fingers writhing in furious contortion, and calling down a curse upon that wicked place, and upon the men of the breed that had wrought his undoing. There was, it had seemed to Halliday, an awful force, an appalling passion and intensity, a volcanic, indestructible vitality in that effort of will which he, that other self, was putting forth, as he called down, blending his words with tremendous blasphemies, destruction upon the

place and its people at the hands of his fellows; destruction at the hands of the Powers of Evil upon all who might follow in their footsteps. It was to Halliday as though all the strength of this man's soul had become transmuted suddenly into a new, an evil, an all-compelling *force*, eternal as is all force, but in this case inexhaustible, unchangeable. Then, in the very midst of his passionate exhortation, Halliday had become aware of a rustling in the grass behind him of which that other self remained unconscious. An instant later and something had struck him violently on the head—a numbing blow that in a flash obliterated sensation. He had awakened to find himself lying upon his mat on board his boat, with the bright sunlight of a Malayan morning casting the glamour of its glory all about him, and with an inconsequent conviction that he had not merely dreamed.

He began of a sudden to be of the like mind with Pawang Mat Jasin, the medicine-man. He would very willingly have abandoned his project of forming a settlement at Kuala Banat. For him, as for the medicine-man, the place was haunted—haunted by the memory of the events which had so strangely been revealed to him; haunted in a fashion yet more grim by that all-pervading, all-compelling *force* which had seemed to emanate from the agonised soul of the man who had stood blaspheming and cursing dreadfully out yonder in the moonlight. That

spirit, racked with pain and hate and rage, seemed to his morbid imagining to have perpetuated itself in a subtle but enormously potent influence that brooded eternally over the scene of its tortures and dissolution. It was this, Martin now thought, which from the first had called him, almost in spite of himself, bidding him return again and again to Kuala Banat, whispering to him ceaselessly that something was required of him. Now, in the full light of the noontide, he shuddered as he asked himself what might be the nature of that something which was demanded by that brooding Spirit.

Vainly he strove to shake himself free of doubts, forebodings, superstitions, but his joy and his peace were gone. He knew himself to be desperately afraid, but the relief of action was denied to him. The projected settlement had been officially approved; public money had been devoted to it. The vividest vision that ever came to ruin sleep would not justify a retreat now in the eyes of a prosaic Government. No, the thing must go on, be the end good or evil. There was no drawing back. Martin Halliday set his teeth, and bade himself endure as best he might.

The Trengganu folk had completed their houses, and that day was occupied in transferring their gear from the boats. Men, women, and children took a hand in the job, and by an early hour in the afternoon the task was com-

pleted. Kuala Banat, for the first time for near four hundred years it is probable, had been settled by the white man's energy and by the victims which, in the white man's Law, that energy so often claims for its own.

There are in Malayan lands two hours of compelling melancholy—the hour that comes before the dawn, the hour that precedes the falling of the night. The first is the season when all things hush suddenly in a breathless quiet, as though expectant of coming evil. It is the moment of slackened vitality which sees so many lives, that have travailed all the night, desist from fight and yield to death ere the breaking of the day. Lying wide-eyed in the darkness, you can almost catch the sound of the flitting spirits that pass, and with them flit also your poor shreds of hope. It is the hour of cold despair or torturing presentiments; of utter, heart-breaking despondency, against which you have, for the moment, nothing of force, of energy, or of courage to oppose. Malays know these things, and they love to prolong sleep until the dawn is yellowing the dim east; but during the hour before the death of day no Malay will willingly coquette with slumber. Men know that this is the season set apart in some especial manner for the dominion of the Powers of Ill, and that a body in which the soul is not alert and wakeful may at such times find itself tenanted suddenly by unbidden guests. The day with its labour and its heat draws

near its ending; once more energies are slackened, vitality ebbs; the spirit which has upheld and driven the body upon its laborious way droops and fails; the chorus of the birds has dwindled down to a few weary twitterings, the strident scream of the cicada has ceased, while the busy hum and tick of night-insects has not yet swelled to the full volume of its monotonous murmurings. Light is dying, colour is fading, form itself is losing gradually its distinctness. The world is becoming merged in vast, lowering shadows, and all things exhale a subtle suggestion of melancholy and of mystery.

Martin Halliday, shaken by his experiences of the previous night, dreading fearfully the hours of darkness that lay ahead of him,—burning also, it may be, with the beginnings of the malignant fever which brought him presently to his death,—stood on the sand-spit that evening watching the dying of the day, and was conscious of an oppression of spirit such as had never visited him before. Old Pawang Mat Jasin crept to his side, and stood for a moment silent, his eye roaming seaward. Then he spoke.

"*Tuan*," he said, "thou surely hast the *grak*—the presentiment of coming evil. All day I have marked thee, and whither didst thou go in the heart of yester-night? Listen to my words, *Tuan*. Quit this evil place now, while there is still time. Come! See my *sampan* lieth yonder. Come!"

"And the Trengganu folk?" queried Halliday.

"Let them bide, *Tuan*," said the medicine-man. "We may not take them with us now lest the Government be angry, seeing that there is an order that they should dwell in this hell-haunted place. Very evidently these same men of Trengganu are to be numbered among those who are the food for the flames of the Terrible Place, fore-ordained from the beginning. It is certainly the will of Allah, the Merciful and the Compassionate. Let them bide; but thou, *Tuan*, come away with me while yet there is time."

"Go thou, if so thou wilt," said Halliday. He had no heart left in him, no conviction wherewith to battle against the superstitions of the medicine-man—or what Martin had till very recently been used to call superstitions. From the bottom of his heart he longed to go, but to go he was ashamed. "Go thou," he repeated.

"While there is time, while there is time!" the Pawang cried breathlessly, clutching Martin's arm with a force that pained. "See, see yonder!"

With outstretched hand that shook violently, he pointed in the direction of a large island to the south; and Martin Halliday, following his gaze, saw something that made his heart stand still.

Round the point of the island, and heading

steadily for Kuala Banat, a ship was making her way—a ship with an impossibly high poop and forecastle and with huge sails of a strange fashion above which flags floated. The evening land-breeze was beginning to spring up, and now blew steadily from the north-east; yet in the teeth of the wind this strange ship sped on, heading steadily for Kuala Banat.

"What is it?" he asked, and his voice fell hoarse and in strange accents upon his ears.

Pawang Mat Jasin was shaking like a leaf, and was repeating with feverish haste the names and praises of Allah and His Prophet.

"While there is yet time," he whispered. "While there is yet time. Come! In the name of Allah, come!"

"But what manner of ship is that?" asked Martin Halliday. "It must be some sort of junk."

Even while he said the word, he knew that never yet did junk sail out of China with form or sails such as those; that never junk or sailing vessel built by man could sweep onward as that ship was sweeping in the very eye of the wind. He had marked her round stem, her great castles built up fore and aft, her heavy bulwarks, her high masts supporting great bellying squares of sail, and he knew her for what she was—something that hitherto had lived for him only in the pages of ancient books—a galleon of the fifteenth century. Was he still dreaming, as the night before he had dreamed?

Pawang Mat Jasin released his arm, and stepped away.

" 'Tis a ship of the devils," he whispered hoarsely, " a junk such as, men say, the devils of this place alone use. If thou wilt not come, I must leave thee, *Tuan*. It is not good for men to war with demons."

He drew his *sundang* from its sheath and rapidly traced a figure on the sand with its blunt point.

" See," he said, pointing to the rude design. " I have drawn here the *Sanggul Patimah*, within which it is not given for any spirit of evil to penetrate. Perchance it may serve thee as a *kubu*—stockade—in the hour of thine extremity. But for me, I crave leave to depart. When a man may not fight, 'tis best to retreat."

He turned away, drew his *sampan* close to the shore, stepped on board, and began to paddle with long, swift strokes northward into the gathering darkness. Martin stood watching him until he was merged in the falling shadows. Turning back, a little before the last of the daylight died, Martin, feeling all at once terribly alone, saw dimly the outline of the galleon sailing onward steadily, indifferent to the freshening breeze. The only sound of which he was conscious was the mournful howling of his dog.

The rest of the story comes to me from Richard Malcolm of the Trigonometrical Survey,

who chanced to turn up at Kuala Banat in a Government launch on the following morning.

" You have asked me to tell you about my arrival at poor Halliday's death-trap," he writes. " It is an experience which I shall never forget, and one that I don't like to recall more often than I can help, but the facts were these. We put into Kuala Banat in the *Ena* just about midday, and at first could not make out what was wrong. The whole beach was strewn with people apparently asleep,—asleep in the blazing sunlight,—which did not seem natural, seeing that a cluster of newly built huts was standing ready for occupation. There was an awful hush over the place, broken only by the woeful howling of a dog; and my Malays looked at one another fearfully and spoke in whispers that made my hair lift. I never, as you know, got the hang of their lingo. Very soon I grasped the fact that we were looking, not at sleeping, but at dead people. After we got ashore, it was the queerest thing you ever set eyes on. Men, women, and children were all lying about like dead men on a battlefield, and every one of them face downward, with arms outflung as though they had fallen in headlong flight. Their faces, too, were as much alike as their attitudes. Each had the eyes protruding in the most ghastly fashion, the mouth open as though in the act of screaming, except in one or two cases where the teeth were locked together like a clinched vice. It gave me the

creeps to look into those faces: they were so many incarnations of Fear petrified.

"We dug a trench and buried the crowd, though I had a job to get my Malays to touch them, and it was only at the last that we found poor Halliday. He was lying like the rest, face downward, with arms outstretched before him, and he was inside a sort of figure-thing which someone had traced upon the sand. His dog sat beside him with uplifted muzzle, howling dismally. Halliday was the only soul alive, but he was as mad as a hatter—and small wonder, seeing that he had been lying for hours with the sun beating down upon the back of his bare head. Of course there was no question of getting a doctor to certify the cause of the death of all these people,—the nearest medical man was a hundred miles away,—but I always fancy that the camp must have been enveloped quite suddenly by some deadly miasma. I don't know how else to account for it: for it was not cholera, that is certain; and there was nothing to make one think that it was poison. I don't know whether there is any exhalation known to science which fits in with my theory. Anyway, I expect there are heaps of things in the jungle that even scientific men know precious little about. It was a stupid thing, I have always thought, to try and colonise Kuala Banat. The natives of the coast, I understand, knew that the place was abominably unhealthy, and never would have anything to do with

it at any price: and natives, it has always seemed to me, know a lot more about this sort of thing than we do."

With that opinion I find myself in profound agreement.

## XII

## IN THE HALF-LIGHT

"Of old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago."

I HAD come from afar. On the preceding evening I had made one of a large company that had assembled at Carcosa—the official abode of the Resident General of the Federated Malay States, at Kuala Lumpor—to dance and flirt and chatter and bridge, to eat a sumptuous ball-supper, and incidentally to drink the health of Her Most Gracious Majesty, Queen Victoria, in celebration of her sixty-second year upon the throne of her fathers. The thing had been exceedingly well done, and if only terms of a moderate character could have been made with the thermometer, we might have cheated ourselves into the belief that we were taking part in some big country-house ball at home. In spite of the heat, however, we had enjoyed ourselves after our fashion: had been inclined to congratulate one another upon the heights to which our local civilisation had attained; and had been dazzled (simple souls!) by the beauty and variety of the frocks displayed, which anywhere

else would have been accounted sadly out-of-date.

We had gone to bed late ; and I, poor wretch, had been obliged to rise early. By seven o'clock I was at the railway station. By a little after nine I was at Kuala Kubu, forty miles away ; and an instant later, I was on my bicycle, with my face pointing eastward, and the immense, blue bulk of the mountains of the main range confronting me beneath a brazen sky.

I need not dwell upon my ride. For two hours and two-and-twenty minutes, without pause or intermission, I had toiled doggedly, at times almost despairingly, up the long, white, winding road, with the inexorable gradient of one foot of rise in every thirty feet of running length—every inch of it against me—weighing upon me sorely like the sins of David. The "divide" reached at last, I had had a tub and a change of clothes ; had eaten ravenously of such things as the rest-house keepers of these lands give us to eat ; and then, mounting my bicycle once more, had plunged down the eastern slope of the mountains at headlong pace.

For fourteen miles the machine had bucketed itself down the grade—scraping past drowsy bullocks and their sleepy drivers ; skirting with perilous wheels the lips of ravines ; dancing across wooden bridges, beneath which the hill-torrents raced furiously ; cantering down the long slope with a joyousness that was infectious.

Gradually I had exchanged the crisp coolness of the mountain passes for the soft, enervating, scent-laden warmth of the foot-hills ; and while the afternoon was still young, I found myself pedalling across the flat valley of the Dong, following that river down to its junction with the waters of the upper Lipis.

My house, the British Residency at Kuala Lipis, lay from this point some five-and-twenty miles down-stream ; but I had turned into the stretch of hilly country, in the heart of which lurk the big rapids of Jeram Besu, down which the whole volume of the Lipis plunges so gloriously, when suddenly one of the cranks of my machine snapped short off, and I was reduced to a painful, one-legged mode of progression, ignominiously reminiscent of the contortions of a crippled mantis. Uphill—and there are many uphill pitches in the road hereabouts—I could make no progress, and was forced to wheel my bicycle ; but on the down-grades and along the flat I got on pretty well. The afternoon was waning, however, and the short-lived dusk was upon me, as I coasted down the last long hill which leads to the great bridge spanning the Lipis, at the foot of the rapids, still eighteen miles from home.

Deciding that I would go no farther that evening, I left my injured bicycle at the police station. Refusing the proffered hospitality of the Malay serjeant and his wife, I quitted the place and walked inland, groping in the gathering

darkness for a slender footpath which led to a neighbouring village.

Eleven years earlier, travelling with a Malay *Raja* on foot, on elephant-back, and down-river on frail bamboo rafts, the journey from Kuala Lumpor to this spot upon the Lipis, which I had that day accomplished in a few hours, had occupied me a matter of nearly three weeks of fairly hard going ; and during all my long ride, the contrast between the present and even that recent past had smitten me, as I sighted each familiar landmark, with the force of a succession of blows. It had awakened in me, too, the nostalgia for the years that have passed from us, and for all those years have held, which is the keenest of all forms of home-sickness.

Presently I found myself in the village—a village hidden from sight by a narrow belt of jungle; a village in which I had spent many a night during the old, half-forgotten times, ere ever the white man's energy, and love of speed and organised order, came to bring peace to a troubled land, and to end its æon-long isolation.

It was quite like old days. As soon as the villagers realised that I had come among them, as long ago I was wont to come, they made me welcome in their old, kindly fashion. I had a dip in the river while the elders of the place, squatting on the banks, held torches aloft for my guidance, and aided me with their counsel. I was provided with a complete outfit of new cotton *sarongs*—one for a skirt, and one to cover

the nakedness of my shoulders; and presently, a welcome meal of rice and curry having been devoured in sepulchral silence, we all gathered round the betel-boxes, set on the mat-strewn floor of the house of the village Headman, and in the half-light of the *damar* torches the peace which is of evening descended upon us.

Indeed I had come from afar. Last night there had been bright lights, pretty frocks, the melody of dance-music, the whispering shuffle of dancing feet,—all the accessories of our developed civilisation,—imported whole and unchanged from home. To-night there was a mass of thatching overhead, black with smoke and hung with a network of cobwebs; a flooring of split bamboos covered with palm-leaf mats; a dim background inhabited by women, cats, and children; a few shabby hangings made of patchwork; a couple of clumsy wooden betel-boxes; and that irregular circle of quaint Oriental figures squatting gravely in the half-light.

The contrast was so sudden and so violent, the change from the one scene to the other was so abrupt, that the imagination was strained to connect the ball-room at Carcosa with this native hut — to realise that they belonged, not only to one and the same planet, but to the same land; that they existed in such close proximity. Last night, and during all that day, I had been a white man, wearing a white man's conventional garb, speaking a white man's language, thinking a white man's thoughts,

using a white man's gear—railway and road and rest-house, and the modern, the prosaic bicycle. To-night, for the nonce, circumstances had made me once again a Malay among Malays: living for a little space the life that of old I was wont to live; sharing the food, the clothes, the lodging of the natives; sharing also, for a fleeting hour, their speech, their thoughts, their feelings; looking again, after a weary while, through their eyes upon the world and its mysteries as these things present themselves to the Malayan vision.

I could remember the time when a goodly portion of Malaya was still wholly Malayan,—God help it!—and of those who sat around me there were many who shared my memories. We had a past in common—they and I; and for a moment it seemed to me as though the wheels of time had been reversed—as though that past, with its halo of picturesqueness and romance, had been restored to us. I had had my hand with my fellows in the toil and labour of revolution; with other white men I had combined to play the part of Providence to a vast area and to thousands of human beings. All day long I had had before my eyes the plain evidences of our work—the annihilation of distance, the regulation and the ordering of life. My very bicycle had been left for safe keeping at a police station not half a mile away. And the insistent recollection of these things mocked the illusion that the old, unregenerate, adventuresome past had come again. Almost unconsciously,

as I sat there in the half-light, I groaned aloud, and the words of an old-world quatrain of the people rose unbidden to my lips—

> "Betel-nut Island boasts a new town;
> Kapitan Oli' is its king.
> Think not upon days that are dead,
> Or, bowing low your head, the tears will flow."

It was a rhyme fashioned rudely by the fisher-folk of Kedah when Captain Light and his company of adventurers broke in upon their solitude, wrung Penang (Betel-nut Island) from their Sultan, and ground the heel of the white man into the face of a lovely land. It is pitifully inarticulate, as are most Malayan expressions of any sentiment which all Malayans share; but in the vernacular it has a sob in it—a note of mourning for that past which has been taken away never to return—such as a man may catch who has ears with which to listen, and a heart with which to understand.

A soft murmur ran through the group which sat around me; for my coming had twanged for these men, as for me, an old chord of memory. Their minds, like mine, were roaming amid the recesses of that Past which had been filched from us so utterly by the thieving years.

"*Ya Allah! Muhammad!*" ejaculated the old Chief, who was my host. "In very truth, it is not good to dream of the brave days that are dead, for straightway a saucy devil awakens in the heart, crying to a man to come back, come back—whither no man may return."

He was a very old man,—near his hundredth year, so village tradition had it,—and the twisted kerchief sat grotesquely on his glassy head, while the long goat's beard on his chin waggled to and fro with the motion of his jaws. His voice, though low, was firm and clear; his wise old eyes, which had looked in their time upon many wonderful things, were still bright; but now the pupils were contracted to mere pin-points, for he was gazing back through the years at the brave, dead days of which he spoke.

"They lie, *Tuan*," he said, almost fiercely, "they lie who declare that age stills the fire of desire in a man's heart! It is not so. I who speak to you—I, who have tasted youth and age—I tell you that they lie. Youth is still awake in this old heart of mine—youth and the hot desire of youth; only the body of me is old. My limbs have turned traitors, and will no longer obey my behests; and the ability to do that which my heart would fain do is taken from me, while the longing is quick in me as it was in the days when I was young.

"*Ya Allah!* They were, in truth, brave days, those days that are for ever dead. Men were men in those times, and the strongest and the boldest was also the happiest and best, for—thy pardon, *Tuan*—a man then stood upon his own two feet and held his place by virtue of his two strong hands: with never a law or a code, made for the protection of cowards, to shore him lest he fall; with never a policeman-thing to be his

buckler ; with never a white man at his beck and call to secure him in possession of that which he lacked the courage and manhood to hold for himself.

"I mind me—ah, the brave days!—when youth was mine,—youth and strength and the pride of life,—when I went forth among my fellows swaggering in my walk, with a *kris* in my girdle and a broadsword in my hand, cocking a masterful eye at youth and maiden ; watching the one make way for me, and the other casting love-glances upon me, while I was secure and uplifted by the knowledge that there were none to gainsay me ; that the whole world—my world, *Tuan*—must yield me up its best. Which of you," he cried in a sort of frenzy, glaring around suddenly upon the younger men of the audience who hung upon his every word, "which of you, I ask, dares say as much to-day ? Hasten, run wailing to the police station ; bid the eye-folk of the Government come witness thy dishonour ! Cry upon them to bring handcuffs, to make ready the stocks, to write meaningless things in booklets, to make attestations in the court-house, to move the white men to aid thee—from a Man ! *Ya Allah, ya Tuhan-ku !* In these pitiful times, if ever ye were to behold a Man, terror would be in those craven hearts of yours, as of old there was terror ; but now the white folk in their wisdom have reared up many barriers behind which the coward may seek shelter—and behold, to seek it ye are by no means ashamed !"

A fit of coughing seized him, and he sat for a minute or two rocking to and fro, fighting with the spasm that tore at his worn-out lungs. Then, with something more of calm, he resumed his monologue.

" I mind me how once, in those spacious days, when youth was mine and the world a free world, I was bidden to a wedding by the Rawa people at Temau. For you must know that at that time the Rawa folk held the valley of the Dong as their own country, paying no heed to the Orang Kaya Stiawangsa, who was the Chief of all the Lipis country ; nor yet to our overlord the Bendahara Sewa Raja, who, under the Sultan of Daik, was the ruler of all Pahang. The Rawa people and the men of Mendheling—both clans of strangers whose true home was in Sumatra—fought one another in the Dong valley for near a score of years, striving for the possession of the gold mines of Raub, sometimes the one, sometimes the other having for the moment the advantage. We of the Lipis valley had little care in the matter of that Raub mine, for nearer at hand were the mines of Jalis, and the Chinese who toiled therein were wise people, who yielded up to us without vain resistance a good half of the gold they won by their labours. That was fitting : but, to our thinking, the Rawas and the Mendhelings were bitten by a maggot of folly that infected their intellects, since it goaded them to work in the mines with their own hands, as, I am told, some of our young men also toil

in these degenerate times. There was a deep hole at Raub, filled to the brim with water, green with duck-weed, and at the bottom thereof there reposed an immense nugget, as big as the head of a full-grown bull buffalo; and it was for the possession of this nugget that the Rawas and Mendhelings warred so ceaselessly. Whichever had, for the season, the mastery, set all its young men diving and groping for the nugget; and once and again a man would feel it with his hands, or with his knife would chip off a fragment as big as a mangosteen. Then the news would reach the enemy; and forthwith there would be a raid, much bloodshed and destruction, whereafter the diving for the nugget would be resumed. Nowadays, the best of nuggets is no bigger than a man's thumb-nail; but in the old times it was not only the hearts of men that were bigger and braver than to-day we find them.

"In this battling of the Rawas with the Mendhelings, I have ever seemed to trace the Finger of Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate God; for thus there was established, as it were at our very doors, a school of chivalry in which our young men of the Lipis valley might be trained and hardened for war, and made ripe for adventure and the performance of brave deeds. It was fighting on behalf of the Rawas on that night when we assaulted Raub, and burned near a score of Mendhelings,—men, women-folk, and children,—stabbing with our knives such of them as sought saucily to win free from the

roaring flames, that I first bathed me in the bullets and smoke of battle ; and it was by reason of the prowess that I then had shown that I was bidden to this wedding at Temau.

" Now you must know that these same Rawas were very evil and arrogant folk, fearing neither god nor devil, and having in them no reverence save for their own lustful selves. Above all, there were, of their leaders, two brothers, who surpassed all their fellows in boldness, and wickedness, and cunning, and power of magic, and in such-like manly qualities ; and these men styled themselves respectively Allah Taäla Muda and Allah Taäla Ber-juntai—that is to say, ' God Almighty the Younger,' and ' God Almighty, enthroned on high, with His legs hanging down ' ; but for shortness' sake, and because of the excessive naughtiness of these titles, we spoke of them commonly as ' The Younger ' and ' He of the Dependent Legs.' Now it was to the wedding of Him of the Dependent Legs that I was bidden.

" I went thither from Sega, walking up the banks of the Lipis, through the open grass country, to Ranggul, where I crossed the river and passed through the orchards and rice-fields until I arrived at Temau. Long ere I sighted the stockade, I heard the throb of the drums, the hoarse *sorak* of the Rawa-folk, and I knew that men were strutting and capering in the sword dance ; and I said to the three who followed at my heels, ' Allah being willing, presently I too will take

a hand in the game that is going forward yonder.'

"I entered the stockade, cocking my chin and swaggering a little in my gait, as was then my wont, and men drew aside to let me pass; while from the houses all about, the bright eyes of the women glinted through the chinks, bidding me a merry welcome. I sat for a space watching the dancing, and in truth the play was of the poorest; wherefore presently I spat upon the ground, as men spit when some unclean thing is at hand. He of the Dependent Legs squatted at my side, watching me, and soon he said in mine ear, and his voice was angry, 'Why dost thou spit, Little Brother?'

"Then looking him in the eyes arrogantly, I made answer, saying, 'I spit, O Dependent Legs, because it pleases me to spit, and moreover, because this child's play that is going forward yonder offends my taste.'

"'Ha, ha, Little Brother,' said He of the Legs. 'The proverb speaks truth when it declares the men of Pahang to be an arrogant breed. Yonder, engaged in that which thou stylest "child's play," is Pendekar Mat Aris, next to my own self the greatest fencer that is to be found among the Rawa people. Will the little child of Pahang (for thus, in his anger, he named me sneeringly) take a part in this game with this poor orphan of a Pendekar?'

"Now at the name of Pendekar Mat Aris my heart had stood still; for his fame as a fencer

had been noised through all the land, and never had I found myself pitted against one of such skill and reputation. If these happenings had befallen to-day to any of you young ones of this narrow time, I make no question that it would have seemed to you that the propitious hour had come in which to call for aid upon the policemen-things, and to seek the protection of law and of white men. But in those years there were no policemen, no laws, and no white men ; and a man's honour or dishonour was in his own, not in his neighbours', keeping.

" He of the Legs had spoken the last words aloud, and a sneer was on his lips, while many eyes—the eyes of men and women alike—were fixed upon my face. If I accepted and failed, I would be dishonoured as one who had boasted vainly without cause ; if I succeeded, name and fame, the admiration and respect of men, and the love of many women, would be mine. The choice was easy.

" Therefore I rose up very slowly, stretching myself insolently, as one who is wearied by some stupidity to near the point of death. Also, very deliberately, I spat upon the ground thrice, and yawning into the face of Him of the Legs, I said, ' My heart asketh for nothing better. Perchance a bout of right fencing will serve to remove from my mouth the evil taste which the watching of so much clumsy fooling hath left there.'

" Then I stepped into the ring, while the great crowd gathered closer around with eagerness and

expectation in their mien; and crossing to the Pendekar, I gave him salutation with all courtesy, touching hands. Next we took up our posts at opposite extremities of the arena, and the fencing began.

"For near as long as it would take to chew a quid of betel-nut, we capered and postured; sank to our knees; rose to our full heights; crouched and sprang—now this way, now that way, but always preserving our distance from one another. I could hear the men grunt comments anent my agility, and from the houses came a titter of delight from the women who watched—a titter broken now and again by long-drawn breaths of deepest satisfaction and pleasure; but all the while, with the tail of my eye, I watched the Pendekar's every movement. He was on his mettle now, and his posturing and his sudden leaps were very fine and courageous; but it seemed to me that he sacrificed to style some of his activity, and that his forward leaps were slow and awkward if compared with his leaps to the sides and to the rear.

"When I judged that I had sufficiently taken the measure of him, I gradually decreased the distance that separated us, edging towards him with averted face, tempting him to the attack. On and on I drew across the arena, my muscles strained, my limbs braced ready for action; and then some instinct whispered to me that the assault was coming. I slewed round, crouching, and beheld him leaping upon me, and so far gone

in his leap that there was for him no halting. A swift movement to one side served to avoid his blow, and as he flashed past me, my palm smote him full in the face. He was caught completely off his balance, and with a crash came headlong to the ground, but not so quickly but that I, with the bony edge of my left foot, had cut his face open from chin to eyebrow. The next instant I was back at my side of the arena capering and posturing majestically, while the people yelled.

"Out of the corner of my eye I watched the Pendekar pick himself out of the dust, his dress disordered, his face streaming blood, his eyes full of anger; and so distracted was he by his mishap that he forgot to assume a fencer's attitude, and stood there spitting out blood and evil words like a beaten child. Therefore I laughed aloud, never ceasing in my posturing, and I cried to the people, 'Behold the handiwork of a child of Pahang! I have taken away his reputation and some portion of his face. Presently, if I be so minded, and if she be well favoured, perchance I will take also his wife.' And again I laughed mockingly.

"At that word, he drew his *kris* clear from his scabbard, and was upon me. I saw him flash across the open space; I saw his eyes ablaze with fury; I saw his set face, his teeth grinding together, his lips drawn back, his white gums exposed to view, snarling. I had no time in which to draw my weapon ere he stabbed; but

my hand went out as quick as the lightning-darts that split the heavens in twain, and I had him by the wrist with his knife-point arrested barely an inch from my breast. Twice more he stabbed ; twice more I caught his wrist and stayed the blade : and at the fourth stab, so fiercely did my grip close upon his flashing arm that I felt the slender bone snap as a twig snaps upon which a man leans too heavily. His dagger fell to the ground, and he stood before me powerless.

" I picked up his weapon, and pricked him with it in the breast, insolently, drawing blood a little, for I was angry. For a moment I had a mind to kill him, even as he would have killed me, while he stood there unarmed and unresisting ; but then the thought came to me that there are worse things than death, and I had the desire to punish him to the full. So once more I laughed lightly, as a girl laughs when her lover whispers soft things to her in the shadows, and pricking him once more with the knife-point, said, so that all the people might hear, ' I thank thee for thy courtesy, To' Pendekar. Thou art bountiful exceedingly ! Behold, thou hast given to me thy name and thy reputation ; this weapon that I hold in my hand for a keepsake, by the aid of which to remember thee ; thy blood, which floweth from thee ; thy bone, which my grip hath snapped. There remaineth, therefore, only a little of the debt unpaid. I have a mind to take also the bone of thy bone, the

flesh of thy flesh,—thy wife, To' Pendekar,—since men say that she is fair.'

" He stood before me impotent, curbed in his pride, but I saw the fire of hatred and of murder in his eyes ; and I was glad, for he had sought to rob me of my life, and life was then passing sweet to me. His right hand hung useless at his side, and his left hand clenched and unclenched vainly in his rage ; but his face worked and was contorted as the face of a lunatic, and the apple in his throat throbbed like a living thing imprisoned and seeking to be free. And as we stood thus, facing one another,—I the victor, he the vanquished,—the crowd parted, and the woman stood before us. She stood there in the sunlight, with the dancing shadows cast by the leaves of the fruit trees overhead playing in and out among the bright silks in which she was clad, and with a *sarong* drawn partly over her face, for she was shamed by the glance of so many eyes ; and for a space she sought to speak, but the words would not come. Then, at last, very pitifully she sobbed out, bending the gaze of her great eyes on me, ' Have patience, Inche ! Have patience a little ! Be not too hard upon him whose fate is accursed. Spare him, Inche ! spare him ! '

" But I was transported by the beauty of her, though in truth she was not more fair than many another, and I made answer, ' I hold by the saying of the men of ancient days : " Let the sparrows mate with sparrows, and the great

hornbills with birds of their own feather!" Thou, Little Sister, art no drab-coloured birdling to pair with this weakling with a broken wing that stands before thee. Rather thou shouldst seek a fitting mate, one worthy of thee, such as am I.'

"'I am not worthy,' she sobbed, for indeed this woman had some sense of the fitness of things; but I bade her be still, and leave such matters to mine own judgment. Then, seeing that I was by no means to be cajoled, she straightway broke forth into such noisy lamentations as women use; for, after the manner of her kind, which is ever perverse and contradictory, she raised most uproar when the heart within her was best pleased.

"Next, turning to the Pendekar, I said, 'Now choose, cripple. Wilt thou have life, or this woman? For, if thou wilt not divorce her according to the Law of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, here and now, thy life shall be forfeit, and thereafter the woman shall be mine. Shall it be a free gift or a capture? Choose, and delay not, for already I hear the sound of a rending shroud, and the grave-mould shouting to the coffin-planks.'

"He burst forth into imprecations, curses, impotent threats. He called down the vengeance of High Heaven upon me with awful cries and blasphemies. He prayed, he implored, he entreated, abasing himself before me, caressing my feet with abjectness and with tears.

But my heart in me was turned to steel when I remembered how he had sought so naughtily to slay me, and how nearly he had compassed his end.

"At last, therefore, he stood upon his feet once more, his countenance sullen and very ungracious; and I, understanding that he would now consent to that which I demanded, chose out my three followers and one other man, my friend, and bade them to be the four adult witnesses and freemen whom the Law insists should hear the words of divorce pronounced.

"They passed into the open space and ranged themselves around, while the woman squatted on the earth, whimpering a little, hard by her husband's feet. Then, as I pricked him shrewdly with the knife-point, as an earnest of what I yet might do, Pendekar Mat Aris repeated hurriedly the prescribed formula: 'I divorce this woman—once!' and again, 'I divorce this woman—twice!' His face was like the face of one three days dead; his eyes were like the eyes of a hunted beast; a thin foam had gathered about his mouth; but the demon of fear pricked him to a final effort. 'I divorce this woman—thrice!' The third *talak* had been given in the presence of witnesses, as is by the Law required. The divorce was pronounced final and irrevocable; but as the words passed his lips the Pendekar fell to the ground, and lay as one dead. I think the wrist which I had broken must have occasioned

him much agony; also, doubtless, he was overcome by the shame and the despair which were in his heart.

"I took the woman for my own, in spite of her pretended reluctance,—it is the way of women to seek by protestations to enhance their value,—nor did I wait for the accomplishment of the *edah*—the hundred days of widowhood which the Law provides should divide a divorced woman from her next bridal. There were some who thought ill of me for this, though they had the discretion to hide their opinions: but indeed I was wise, for ere the hundred days were accomplished I had wearied of the woman; wherefore I never married her, but suffered her to go from me whither she would, after she had abided with me a matter of some two months. Also, by that time I had another love affair upon my hands in the matter of the young wife of Him of the Dependent Legs—her at whose wedding I had assisted. She, sitting hidden from sight within the house, had been a witness of my prowess, and she had fallen (who can blame her?) deep in love with me. There was great trouble in the Lipis valley by reason of that elopement, for the Rawa people raided us, and many lives were lost, many homesteads burned with fire, and many folk carried off into slavery; nor did the strife cease until the Order came in the appointed hour to Him of the Dependent Legs, and he went headlong to the Fires of the

Terrible Place babbling excuses for his insolent usurpation of that awful Name.

"*Ya Allah! Ya Tahun-ku!* Said I not truly that life was life in those untrammelled days; that men were men; that all were free to carve out, each for himself, such things as his heart lusted after, such things as his hands had strength to grip and the courage to hold?"

Another fit of coughing seized the aged Headman, and again he rocked to and fro rent by the spasm, a dreadful shadow cast by that lurid Past upon the tranquil, ordered, seemly Present.

When the fit of noisy coughing had ended, another villager took up the tale.

"Brave days," he crooned—for he too was an aged man. "Brave days, in very truth, were those days when the heart and the body were young, but they were grim times for many a man. Dost remember To' Kli?" he said, addressing the Headman. "Dost remember when Wan Da raided this Lipis valley from across the mountains of Selangor, seeking to win back the Throne of Pahang from his uncle, Underneath-the-Foot? We sent petition post-haste to Pekan, praying Underneath-the-Foot to send us aid, so that we might make issue with our trouble; and after a weary while there came big boats loaded with guns and shooting medicine, wherewith to arm us; and bearing also, it may be, some twoscore of

the King's Youths—men bred to be the food of spears, as the saying is. Wan Da, the invader, had amassed some wealth by raiding for many months the hill-tribes folk of the main range—Sakai of no account—and selling their children into slavery to the miners of Selangor. Also he had gotten him the Raub mine, and held the whole country up to the fringes of Durian S'batang. The great Trunk Road runs to-day not a stone's-throw from the stockade which he then built. The mud walls stand to this hour. You must have seen them, *Tuan*, but a little while ago as you passed by on your air-carriage.

"Now, when first the King's Youths arrived, we of the Lipis valley were very well content, for we said among ourselves, 'Now, at last, shall we have protection. Now these warriors will fight the enemy; our cattle and our homes will be secure; we shall have some scant leisure in which to have a care for our rice-fields, so that the women and the little ones may not cry in vain for food.'

"But very soon we discovered that we had gotten two enemies in place of one; for the King's Youths came amongst us like the *toman* fish which devour their own young. They had the manners and the cleverness which are bred in those who sojourn at the Courts of Kings; they had conquering airs, bright weapons, ready tongues, fine garments of many colours, and nimble wits. In a little space there was trouble

in our villages, for they ate our substance, slaughtered our cattle for their food, stripped our fruit trees, and did us all manner of dishonour in the name of the King. But worst of all; they intruded into our households. Now, a man's house is intended by Allah to be his own ; and a man's women-folk are dedicated to his peculiar service ; but the naughty Youths, whom the King had sent for our defence, would by no means acquiesce in these propositions. Instead, they made love under our very eyes to all our women-kind—from the little virgin daughters, sitting secluded on the hanging-shelf, to the wife busy with her household affairs among the cooking-pots. It was a very great scandal, the more so since the fickle women,—for Allah hath withholden from these all judgment and discretion, dowering them only with a certain shame, that serves in some imperfect measure to curb the desire of their hearts,—flattered by the insolent attentions of these town-bred gallants, conspired with them unceasingly to work our dishonour.

"One night when I was sleeping in my house in the village of Sega, I was aroused by a tapping on the door ; and rising up, I beheld my brother Meng standing without, his face pale in the moonlight. At his bidding, I took my arms and went forth to join him ; and then, with shaking voice, he whispered in mine ear how one Saiyid Ebong, a King's Youth, and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, had entered his

house with four armed followers, and had bidden him roughly be gone. Now Meng, the son of my mother's brother, and therefore mine own brother to me, had been but lately wedded to a girl, the daughter of my father's sister's husband—a pretty maid, but sadly lacking both in propriety and discretion; and Meng wept with rage and jealousy as he thought of her closeted with the Saiyid. Yet what could he do? He was one man against four; he was unskilled in the use of weapons, and they were trained to arms from their youth upward. Moreover, they were of the number of the King's Youths, and under the King's protection. Therefore he had come to me, weeping and wailing, seeking my aid and counsel. Together we aroused from their slumbers sundry other of the villagers, and told them that which had befallen; but they were timorous, and they besought Meng that he would make with his calamity such issue as he might, not involving them, lest some worse trouble should fall upon the entire village. I also added my prayer to theirs; but Meng was past reason, for the demon of jealousy had him in his grip, and drawing his wood-knife—he had no *kris*—he made as though he would have slain me, and then dashed from me in the direction of his house. I followed at a safe distance, and in the calm moonlight I watched his figure flitting like a shadow between the trunks of the cocoa-nut trees. Creeping under the raised flooring of his house, he stabbed up-

ward furiously in a certain spot, where he knew the sleeping mats to lie stretched, and a woman's scream answered the thrust. I heard him give a hard coughing cry, deep down in his throat, and then he stabbed again, and yet again. Lights sprang into red life within the hut ; there was a great outcry and commotion, a running to and fro of feet upon the yielding bamboo laths. Then the door was flung wide, and a knot of men fell through the opening down the stairway to the ground. Meng dashed from under the house yelling, ' Amok ! Amok ! ' and flung himself upon the heap of struggling men. I saw the blade of his wood-knife rise and fall, flashing in the moonlight ; I heard cries of pain and terror ; and dimly, half revealed, I spied the pale face of the Saiyid peep through the open doorway and then withdraw into the darkness.

" I saw the struggling knot of human beings break, just as a bubble breaks, and become dissolved into its component parts. The bodies of one man and of one old woman remained upon the spot over which it had rolled and writhed. Meng's weapon had taken so much toll. I saw three figures rush away into the shadows. I saw Meng, limping a little from some hurt, and bewildered by the darkness, run in pursuit, first of one, then of another, and at last stand still, his wood-knife dripping blood. He raised a strained face skyward, and the moonlight fell full upon it. Never shall I forget that face ! It was gashed across by a cut from

which the blood flowed freely; the teeth were locked together, like the teeth of a tiger that has died fighting hard for life; the skin was sallow and unpleasant to the sight, as the skin of a corpse; and the eyes, tense with agony and with despair, were fixed accusingly upon High Heaven. Thrice he cried aloud in a voice that fell lamentably upon the quiet of the night—cried to God: 'Allah! Allah! Allah!' It was a terrible cry to which to listen, for there was in it a note of great bitterness, a great despair, an intense revolt against the cruelty, the injustice of Fate. Then his voice broke in a sob, and 'Iang,' he cried, and again, 'Iang, my little Iang,' calling pitifully upon his wife, for he knew that he had killed her. Next, with a sudden leap, he plunged into the brushwood at the edge of the village, and was gone.

"There was a great commotion in the village, for word soon spread that Meng, the son of my mother's brother, and mine own brother to me, had run *amok*, and all doors were barred and a strict watch kept. The Saiyid, whose misdeeds had brought this trouble upon us, was very angry, speaking pungent words to our elders, and threatening them with the wrath of Underneath-the-Foot, in that a gross dishonour had been wrought upon his servants. At dawn the next day there was a panic at the river-brink, for Meng, leaping from a hiding-place in the underwood, fell upon those who had come down to fetch water, slaying a man, a woman, and two

children, and escaping unhurt ere any could stay him. At this the anger of the Saiyid passed beyond all bounds ; and at last, obedient to his bidding, we sallied forth ; and Omar, the son of Chik, shot Meng from afar with one of the King's rifles while he sat dropping to sleep at the foot of a forest tree, not dreaming that anyone was at hand.

"Later, when the Saiyid had made representation to the King, we of Sega were forced to pay much *diat*—blood-money—on account of the killings which Meng in his madness had wrought. *Ahi*, *Ahi*, that was, in truth, an evil season! Our crops were perforce neglected ; we dared no longer resist the King's Youths, and could only shut our eyes, as best we might, to their wickednesses ; and even when (longing to be free of these our oppressors) we rose and drove Wan Da and his people back into Selangor, the King sent one of his Treasurers up-stream, and exacted from our villages a heavy price as the cost of the weapons and the shooting-medicine which he had supplied, and which we had used for the routing of his enemies.

"*Ahi*, Dato', those days were brave days, perchance, because we, who now are old, then were young ; and youth, surely, is above all gifts—the best seasoning for every appetite, the one seasoning that never yet bred satiety. But though youth itself was good, and the brave days were brave for those who held power and strength,—as was the case with thee and with the Saiyid,—

what of us weaklings, who had neither the one nor the other—we, the cattle of mankind, who bore the burdens of all, and had no means to ease or lighten them?"

A silence fell upon us as we squatted there in the half-dark; and then a youngster lifted up his voice and spoke.

"For me," he said, "I hold the opinion of the aged Dato' here. Give me a free world for a man to carve as Fate and his own strong hands permit. There must have been a savour in the times of which ye tell. Now, what is there? School for our boyhood; a little of love and of loitering for our youth; nothing to awaken the dormant manhood in the heart of a man; no deeds to do, no tests of courage, no guerdons to be gained by a prowess greater than that which belongs to one's fellows. It is a dead, a monotonous, a stupid world into which we of to-day are born; and I say, 'Give us back the Past, with all its risks, out of which a triumph might be torn by manhood!'"

There was a hum of approval from all the young men who sat around; but the present Headman of the village, the grandson of the old Chief who was my host, checked it with a gesture.

"Hearken to me," he said, "for I have lived actively in the old and in the new. I have known both, I have judged both, and I speak words that are true. It is like this. To you, very wise ones,—whose span of life barely equals

the three months that go to a season of maize,—and to thee, Dato',—whose years are so heavy upon thee that thou livest now only in the memory of thy youth,—it is the old times that are good, because they seem to hold in them the fire of youth and the pride of life. To you young ones they are good, because you do not understand; whilst thou, who art very old, dost forget many things.

"Have you ever seen a tiger spring upon the neck of a buffalo as the kine troop down to water? Have you noted the sureness of the blow, the judgment of the leap, and how the cattle scatter and fly, not dreaming of resistance? Have you thought of the terror in the heart of the buffaloes, as nightly they take their way across the pastures in the quiet of the eventide, not knowing when a bush may be rent asunder by the crashing onslaught of the great beast, whose coming means death to one, despairing flight to all? Well, in the olden times, of which my memory still holds the undimmed record, we, the people of the land,—the men not born to high rank or station,—were a herd of buffaloes; and the tigers—the Rajas, the Chiefs, ay, and brave and strong men like the Dato' here—were over-numerous, and held us at their mercy; and of mercy they had scant measure.

"Now once, long ago, I chanced to be at the Court of the King when there was great work forward by reason of his daughter's wedding;

and among the sports arranged for the pleasure of the noble company there assembled was a duel to the death between a buffalo bull, of great size and comeliness, and a full-grown male tiger—the most splendid that my eyes have ever looked upon. A big arena, fenced with the trunks of cocoa-nut trees driven deep into the ground, had been prepared; and first of all the tiger was let loose, and he came forth, very handsome and majestic, lashing his flanks with his tail, and snarling a little at the scent of so many human beings. We who looked upon him held our breath in admiration, for he was in truth very wonder-compelling and awe-inspiring in his magnificence and his ferocity. There was the monster, fierce and cruel and brave, the thought of which had been an abiding terror to the defenceless kine straying through the pastures; and surely he had, in his time, taken from them many a heavy toll. As I looked upon him, I said in my heart, 'Yonder stands my Lord the King!' And sorrow was in my soul in that Fate had fashioned me of common clay—or, as it were, had made me only one of the grazing kine, not a flesh-eater such as this.

"Then, next, certain doors were flung wide at the opposite side of the arena, and through them was admitted the huge buffalo bull. He was big of limb, cleanly formed, and the muscles stood out like the rounded coils of the fig-vine that eat into the bark of a tree. Also his hide

was glossy, for he was in fighting trim, and those who tended him had groomed him with loving hands. He moved out into the open space as the door fell to behind him, holding his head high, and blowing a little at the tiger-tainted wind. Back and back went his horns, till the tips touched his shoulder points; and up and up went his muzzle, while his eyes looked down its length at his enemy with, as it were, a kind of contemptuous disgust. Thrice his off fore hoof was lifted, and as he smote the earth with it he snorted mightily; but there was pride and anger, not fear, in the sound that came from his nostrils.

"I glanced from him to the tiger, and behold, the demeanour of that kingly beast had changed. He was no longer the majestic one who rules so cruelly over the brutes of the forest and the field; he was transformed into a big sneaking cat—a cat that was much afraid—that ran to and fro, to and fro against the stout barriers of the arena, seeking vainly to escape.

"Another snort of defiance and of anger came from the buffalo. Then, in a flash, his great head dropped between his forefeet, and was tucked away beneath his belly, so that the horns stood out like two immense reaping hooks, such as the Rawas use. His limbs were gathered under him; together they smote the ground; and with incredible speed the huge bulk of the beast was hurled forward in the direction of the tiger, the little angry eyes

lurking behind the horns, guiding the onslaught. The horns struck the tiger full in the flank, piercing his striped skin. Next the great cat was lifted off the ground, and was rubbed this way and that against the stout cocoa-nut trunks. Then, with a tremendous heave, it was thrown clear into the air. A moment later it was a writhing mass of blood and stained skin, mangled and broken and rent; and the buffalo, with no hurt save a scratch upon his nose, drew back snorting and stamping, to glare upon the ruin he had wrought.

"My brothers, for once the tiger and the buffalo had been suffered to fight out a passage of their eternal battle with a fair field and no favour; and behold, the buffalo—he who since the beginning of things hath ever been the vanquished one—stood revealed the victor, and the secret of the tiger's prowess was made manifest. He owed his triumphs, my brothers, not to his strength, not to his valour, not to any of the qualities that make for greatness, but solely to the advantage of position.

"That was a spectacle that set me, and it may be others too, a-thinking; for the battle between the tiger and the bull appeared to many of us to be, in some sort, an allegory. Was it, I asked myself, by virtue of some inherent superiority that those whom Fate had dowered with high station played the *rôle* of the tiger, while we, folk of little standing, were held at their mercy, at their will and pleasure, even

as the dull kine are held? Or was it after all—the thought persisted—with our rulers as with the tiger—the advantage of position that gave or denied victories?

"Later, when the white folk came into this same land of Pahang, it seemed to me that the barriers — the police stations, the eye-folk of the Government, the court-houses, the white men, who deal out justice with an even hand to rich and poor, strong and weak, great and small,—all the things of which the Dato' here spoke slightingly a little while ago,—were, in truth, the barriers of that arena in which the battle between the kine and the tiger could be fought out at last on an equality. Now which, think you, afforded the chance to the buffalo of displaying such qualities of valour as he possessed—the open pastures, where the advantage of position was ever with his enemy, or the walled arena, in which each stood forth, robbed of all outside aids, each to face each with such strength and courage as Allah hath vouchsafed to him?

"Oh, you very wise young men,—who know nothing, because your memories register no experiences,—when you dwell in fancy upon the days that are dead, you behold them through the glamour of the half-light, such as that in which we here sit talking. You see only the outlines, bold and beautiful—only the charm and the romance. But in the full light such as memory sheds I see the truth—the

bitter, cruel truth; and humbly I thank Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, because the face of our world is changed. To all of you it seemeth, when dreams of the past fill you with regret,—that past of which you never supped the bitter taste,—that you would have been counted among the number of the tigers; that others, not you, would have been the kine upon which your lordships would have preyed. But remember, though the tiger-folk were over-numerous for the comfort of their fellows, the kine were as a hundred to one; and by such odds is the chance to be reckoned against your ability—had you lived in those times—to take that for which your hearts lusted, or even to keep securely that which was your own according to the law of man and of God. Ponder this in your hearts, and thank Allah for the present, wasting no foolish tears over the past, which held so much of bitterness and of sorrow for us all. Also—I crave thy pardon, Dato'—the barriers which the white folk have reared about us, for the confusion of evil-doers and for the defence of the impotent, cannot fittingly be named 'shelters upbuilt for the protection of cowards.' Rather they are means whereby all men are robbed of the advantage of position; wherefore to-day, in a measure which in the past was undreamed of, each man stands upon his own two feet, holds his Fate in his own two hands—and, to my thinking, thereby is developed in the heart of each one of us such seeds of

manliness as Allah hath bestowed upon him at his birth, if he lack not the soul wherewith to win the mastery over Fate."

A silence fell upon the group of Malayan villagers, and thoughts crowded my mind. I had stepped out of the present into the past; out of our modern civilisation into the old adventuresome, romantic life which of old had been dear to me. For me too its memories held the glamour and the glory of youth,—were hallowed by the "light that never was on land or sea"; and at my first coming that evening, with the past suddenly revived for me by the old familiar sights and experiences,—the sounds that I had known so well, the faint soft scents of the fruit-groves without, and of the smoke of the wood-fire within the native hut,—I too had been stirred with sentimental regrets for the old order, that in passing had deprived me of so much of my individual freedom and liberty, and had penned me in a present too narrow for my needs. Also, for a moment, I had been beset with doubt. From the ball-room at Carcosa to the hut of the Malayan Headman, from the new to the old, from the elaborate environment of a fastidious civilisation to the old-world, primitive surroundings of this native gathering, I had had to make, as it seemed, hardly more than a single step. And behold all things were as I remembered them: nothing had suffered change. Was it then, after all, only a surface transformation that we had wrought?

Had we only plastered over the unalterable face of the East a thin veneer, which the action of Time, perhaps, would chip away almost as quickly as our busy hands had contrived to impose it? The thought had had in it a sort of terror. The meanest of us who accepts for his lot in life the career of a civil servant in Asia pays in his own person, and in the persons of those who are dearest to him, many a heavy price for his country's Empire. Take away from us, even for a moment, our faith in the value of the work to which we have set our hands, to which we have devoted our lives, for which we have made so many and such bitter sacrifices, and there is taken from us also all hope, all *raison d'être*, all that remains to us of contentment, of consolation, of solace, of recompense. If the British Empire in the East be not the greatest engine for good that God in His eternal wisdom hath made; if the work upon which we spend ourselves (judged not only by balance-sheets, but by results of a vaster, higher, deeper, broader, more lasting character) be not innately and in itself worthy of accomplishment,—a definite contribution to the permanent improvement of the condition of mankind,—then we ourselves have wasted our days—those precious days that will never dawn again—and all the labour and the sorrow and the sacrifice are in vain.

This I had felt when, obeying a momentary impulse, I had quoted to my companions the

rude quatrain of the Kedah fisher-folk, which had set a-flowing these streams of Malayan talk. But now I was comforted. As the younger of the two Headmen had said, I had, with the youngsters around me, been tempted for a space to look at the Past—hallowed by the dim beauties of memory—even as men see things with their ugliness mercifully veiled when they gaze upon them in the half-light. Now, in a flash, life in Malaya was revealed to me as it was and is; and I was glad because the Past—with all its bravery, all its romance, and all its ills—was dead.

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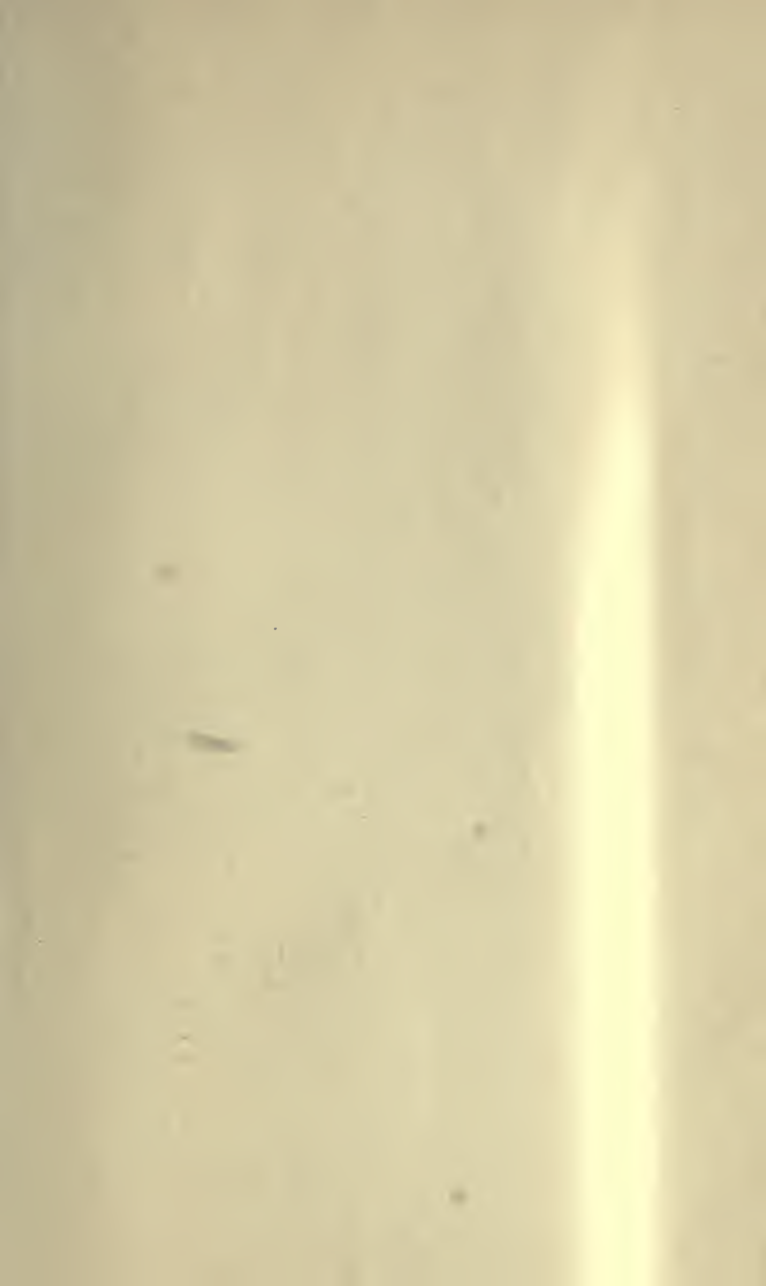

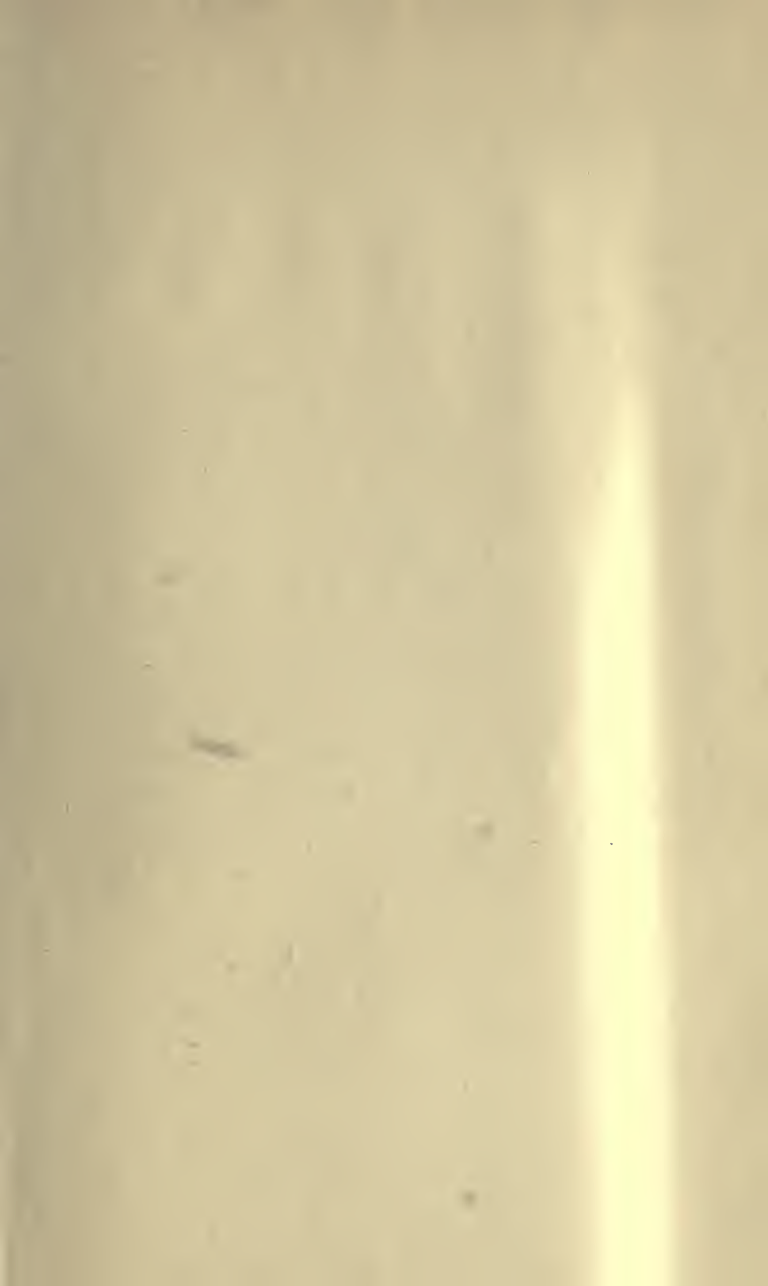

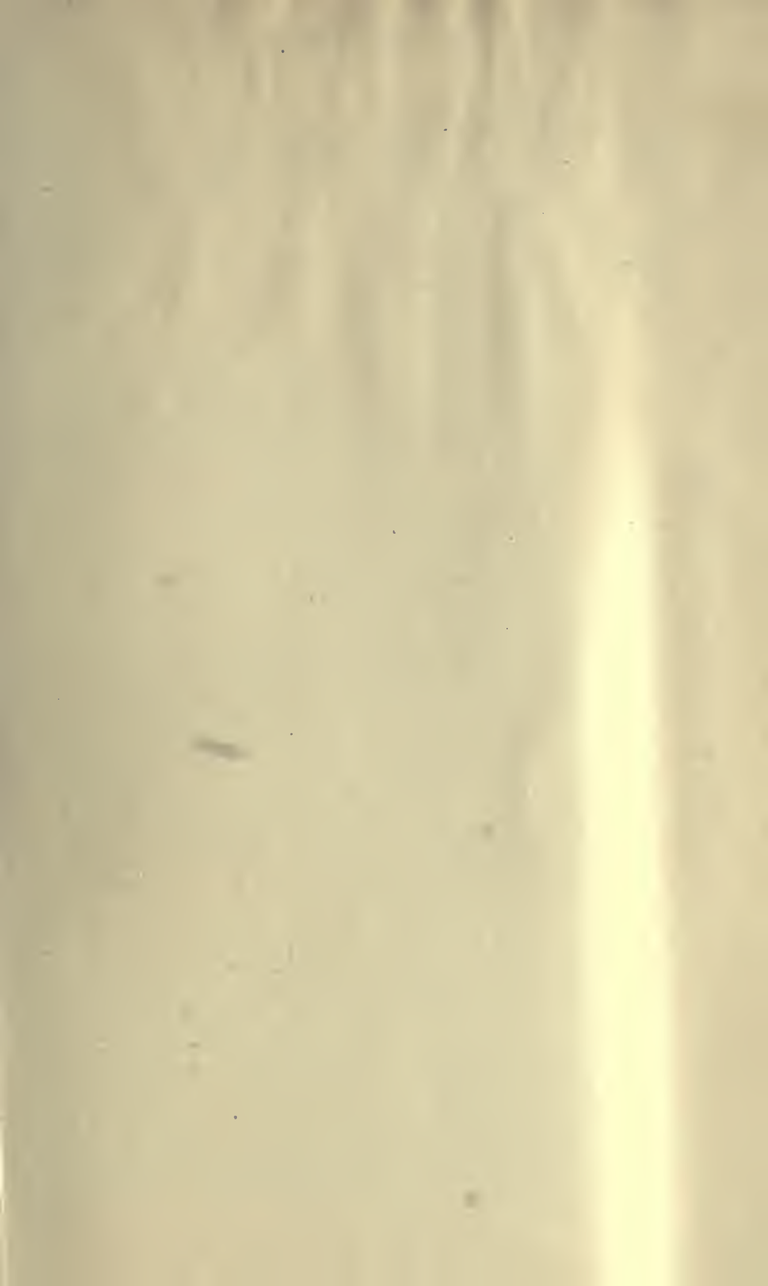

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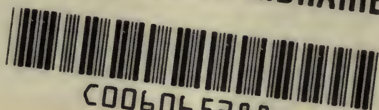


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